

EXHIBIT B-2

Sometimes Keeping
Your Enemies Close
Is the Only Thing that
Prevents Hypothermia

Damn it.

I swore to myself that I wouldn't go running like a scared rabbit the next time I saw Jaxon, but this doesn't exactly seem like the time to hang around. Not when everything about their conversation screams *intense*. And—more importantly—*private*.

The way his and Lia's bodies are angled toward each other but aren't actually touching.

The rigidness of their shoulders.

How they're both completely wrapped up in whatever the other one is saying.

There's a part of me that wishes I were closer, wishes I could hear what they're talking about even though it is *absolutely none of my business*. Still, any people who look as grim and angry as these two do obviously have some kind of problem, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to know what it is.

I'm not sure why it matters so much to me, except there's an intimacy to their fighting that makes my stomach hurt. Which is absurd, considering I barely know Jaxon. And considering that two of the four times we've run into each other, he's blown past

me like I don't even exist.

That in and of itself is a pretty big hint that he wants nothing to do with me.

Except I keep remembering the look on his face when he chased those guys away from me the first night. The way his pupils were all blown out when he touched my face and wiped the drop of blood from my lips.

The way his body brushed against mine and it felt like everything inside me was holding its breath, just waiting for a chance to come alive.

We didn't feel like strangers then.

Which is probably why I keep watching him and Lia, against my better judgment.

They're arguing fiercely now, so much so that I can hear their raised voices, even as far away as I am. I'm not close enough to actually make out the words, but I don't need to know what they're saying to know just how furious they both are.

And that's before Lia lashes out at him, her open palm cracking against his scarred cheek hard enough to have Jaxon's head flying back. He doesn't hit her in return. In fact, he doesn't do anything at all until her palm comes flying at his face again.

This time, he catches her wrist in his hand and holds tight as she struggles to pull away. She's screaming full-out now, harsh sounds of rage and agony that claw their way inside me and bring tears to my eyes.

I know those sounds. I know the agony that causes them and the rage that makes it impossible to contain them. I know how they come from deep inside and how they leave your throat—and your soul—shredded in their wake.

Instinctively, I take a step toward her—toward them—galvanized by Lia's pain and the barely leashed violence that hangs in the air between them. But the wind picks up as I take

that first step, and suddenly they're both turning and staring at me with flat black eyes that send a chill straight through me. A chill that has nothing to do with the cold and everything to do with Jaxon and Lia and the way they're looking at me.

Like they're the predators and I'm the prey they can't wait to sink their teeth into.

I tell myself that I'm just spooked, but it doesn't help me shake the weird feeling, even as I give them both a little wave. I thought Lia and I might be becoming friends yesterday—especially when she suggested doing mani-pedis together—but it's obvious that friendship doesn't extend to whatever is happening here. Which is fine. The last thing I want to do is get in the middle of a fight between two people who obviously have some kind of history together. But I also don't want to leave them alone if their fight has deteriorated to her hitting him and him grabbing her in self-defense.

All of which leaves me unsure of what I'm supposed to do now, stuck where I am, an awkward guard staring at both of them in an effort to prevent I-don't-know-what while they stare right back at me.

But when Jaxon drops Lia's wrist and takes a couple of steps toward me, the same panic that hit me yesterday at the party slams through me again. As does the same odd fascination I've had from the beginning. I don't know what it is about him, but every time I catch sight of him, I feel something tug at me I can't identify, something I have no ability to explain.

He advances a few more steps, and my heart kicks up another notch or fifty. Still, I stand my ground—I ran from Jaxon once. I'm not going to do it a second time.

But then Lia reaches out, grabbing *him*, holding *him* back, pulling *him* toward her. The dangerous look fades from her eyes (though not from his) until it's almost like it was never there, and

she waves at me enthusiastically.

“Hi, Grace! Come join us.”

Ummm, no thanks. Not in a million years. Not when every instinct I have is screaming at me to flee, even though I don’t know why.

So instead of moving forward, I give her another little wave and call, “Actually, I’ve got to get back to my room before Macy sends out another search party. I just wanted to explore a little bit before I start classes tomorrow. Have a good afternoon!”

The last seems like major overkill, considering the fury I sense between them, but I tend to either clam up or babble when I’m nervous, so all in all, it’s not a *terrible* performance. Or at least that’s what I tell myself as I turn and start walking away as fast as I can without actually running.

Every step is a lesson in self-control as I have to force myself not to look back over my shoulder to see if Jaxon is still watching me. The prickle at the back of my neck says he is, but I ignore it.

Just like I ignore the weird feeling inside me that has shown up every time I’ve seen him. I assure myself it’s nothing, that it doesn’t matter. Because no way am I about to crush on a boy this complicated.

Still, the urge to turn around stays with me—right up until Jaxon appears by my side, eyes gleaming with interest and sexy-as-hair blowing in the wind.

“What’s the rush?” he asks, scooting in front of me so that he’s directly in my path, walking backward so we’re face-to-face and I’m forced to slow down or bump into him.

“Nothing.” I look down so I don’t have to look him in the eye. “I’m cold.”

“So which is it? Nothing?” He stops walking, which forces me to do the same, then puts a finger under my chin and presses up until I relent and meet his gaze. He flashes me a crooked little

smile that does unspeakable things to my heart—the whole reason I’d been trying not to look at him to begin with. Especially considering what I just saw between him and Lia. “Or the cold?”

If I look closely, I can still see the imprint of her hand on his scarred cheek. It pisses me off, more than it should considering I barely know the guy. Which is why I take a deliberate step to the side and say, “The cold. So if you’ll excuse me...”

“You’re wearing an awful lot of clothes,” he tells me—confirming that I look as ridiculous as I feel—as he moves until he’s once again in front of me. “You sure the cold’s not just an excuse?”

“I don’t need to make excuses to you.” And yet I am—making excuses and trying to run away from him and what I just saw. Trying to run away from all the things he makes me feel when all I really want to do is grab on to him and hold on tight. It’s an absurd thought, an absurd feeling, but that doesn’t make it any less real.

He tilts his head, quirks a brow, and somehow has my heart beating that much faster because of it. “Don’t you?”

This is the part where I should start walking. The part where I should do a lot of things, *anything*, that doesn’t involve throwing myself at Jaxon Vega like I’m the game-deciding pitch at the World Series. But I don’t do that.

Instead, I stay where I am. Not because Jaxon is blocking my way—which he is—but because everything inside me is responding to everything inside him. Even the danger. *Especially* the danger, though I’ve never been that girl before, the one who takes risks just to see how they feel.

Maybe that’s why—instead of moving around him and running back to the castle like I should—I look him straight in the eye and say, “No. I don’t answer to you.”

He laughs. He actually laughs, and it’s the most arrogant

thing I've ever heard.

"Everyone answers to me...eventually."

Oh. My. God. What an *asshat*.

I roll my eyes and step around him, moving up the path with a stiff back and a fast pace that all but screams for him not to follow. Because when he says stuff like that, it doesn't matter how drawn to him I feel. I've got better things to do than waste my time on a guy who thinks he's God's gift to everyone.

Except Jaxon must not be as adept at reading body language as I thought—or he just doesn't care. Either way, he doesn't let me go like I expect. Instead, he starts walking right alongside me again, keeping pace no matter how hard and fast I push myself.

It's annoying as fuck, even without the obnoxious smirk he doesn't try to hide. Or the multiple sidelong glances that precede the words: "Hanging out with Flint Montgomery isn't exactly keeping your head down."

I ignore him, do my best Dory impression. *Just keep walking, just keep walking.*

"I'm only saying," he continues when I don't respond, "making friends with a dra—" He breaks off, clears his throat before trying again. "Making friends with a guy like Flint is..."

"What?" I turn on him, frustration racing through me. "Being friends with Flint is *what* exactly?"

"Like painting a target on your back," he answers, looking a little taken aback by my anger. "It's pretty much the opposite of keeping a low profile."

"Oh, really? So what exactly is hanging out with *you*, then?"

His face goes blank, and I don't think he's going to answer. But eventually, he says, "Utter and complete stupidity."

Not the answer I was expecting, especially from someone as arrogant and annoying as he can be. The blunt honesty of it slips past my defenses, though. Has me answering when I didn't

think there was anything else to say. “Yet here you are.”

“Yeah.” His dark, bemused eyes search my face. “Here I am.”

Silence echoes between us—dark, loaded, unfathomable—even as tension stretches taut as a circus high wire.

I should go.

He should go.

Neither of us moves. I’m not sure I even breathe.

Finally, Jaxon breaks the stillness—though not the tension—by taking a step closer to me. Then another and another, until the only thing that separates us is the bulky weight of my coat and the thinnest sliver of air.

Chills that have nothing to do with the cold and everything to do with Jaxon’s proximity dance up and down my spine.

My heart pounds.

My head swims.

My mouth goes desert dry.

And the rest of me doesn’t fare much better...especially when Jaxon reaches for my gloved hand, rubs his thumb back and forth across my palm.

“What were you and Flint talking about?” he asks after a second. “At the party?”

“I honestly don’t remember.” Which sounds like a cop-out answer, but it’s really just the truth. With Jaxon touching me, I’m lucky to remember my own name.

He doesn’t challenge my words. But the corners of his lips tip up in a very self-satisfied smile as he murmurs, “Good.”

His smirk jump-starts my brain—finally—and then it’s my turn to ask a question. “What were you and Lia fighting about?”

I don’t know what I expect—his gaze to go flat again, probably, or for him to tell me that it’s none of my business. Instead, he says, “My brother,” in a tone that doesn’t ask for sympathy and warns that he won’t permit it.

It's not the answer I was expecting, but as the very few pieces I have start fitting themselves together in my head, my heart plummets. "Was...was Hudson your brother?"

For the first time, I see genuine surprise in his eyes. "Who told you about Hudson?"

"Lia did. Last night when we were having tea. She mentioned that—" I break off at the glacial coldness in his eyes.

"What did she tell you?" The words are quiet, but that only makes them hit harder. As does the way he drops my hand.

I swallow, then finish in a rush. "Just that her boyfriend died. She didn't say anything about you at all. I just took a guess that her boyfriend might also be..."

"My brother? Yeah, Hudson was my brother." The words drip ice, in an effort—I think—to keep me from knowing how much they hurt. But I've been there, have spent weeks doing the same thing, and he doesn't fool me.

"I'm sorry," I tell him, and this time I'm the one who reaches for him. The one whose fingers whisper over his wrist and the back of his hand. "I know it doesn't mean anything, that it doesn't touch the kind of grief you're feeling. But I truly am sorry you're hurting."

For long seconds, he doesn't say anything. Just watches me with those dark eyes that see so much and show so little. Finally, when I'm searching my brain for something else to say, he asks, "What makes you think I'm hurting?"

"Aren't you?" I challenge.

More silence. Then, "I don't know."

I shake my head. "I don't know what that means."

He shakes his head, then moves back several feet. My hand clenches, missing the feel of him under my fingers.

"I have to go."

"Wait." I know better, but I reach for him again. I can't help

it. “Just like that?”

He lets me hold his hand for one second, two. Then he turns and walks back down the path to the pond so fast, it’s nearly a run.

I don’t even bother trying to keep up. If I’ve learned anything in the last couple of days, it’s that when Jaxon Vega wants to disappear, he disappears, and there’s nothing I can do about it. Instead, I turn in the other direction and head back to the castle.

Now that I have a set destination in mind, the walk seems much faster than my original wandering did. But I still can’t shake the uncomfortable feeling that I’m being watched. Which is absurd, considering Jaxon went in the other direction and Lia disappeared right after her argument with him.

The feeling stays with me the whole time I’m outside. And something else is niggling at me, too, something I can’t quite figure out. At least not until I reach the warmth and safety of the castle—and my room. It’s as I’m peeling off all the layers I’m wearing that it finally hits me.

Neither Lia nor Jaxon was wearing a jacket.

17

It's Discretion, not Diamonds, That's a Girl's Best Friend

“**Y**ou sure you're up for this?” Macy asks several hours later as I grab a sweatshirt from my closet.

Is she kidding? “Not even a little bit.”

“That's what I figured.” She heaves a huge sigh. “We could cancel if you want. Tell everyone you're still not over the altitude sickness.”

“And have Flint think I'm chicken? No thank you.” I actually couldn't care less if Flint thinks I'm afraid or not. But Macy has been so excited about this snowball fight that there's no way I'm going to take it away from her. The fact that she offered to cancel because she knows I'm not into it only makes me more determined to go. “We're doing this snowball fight and we're going to...”

“Kick some butt?”

“I was thinking more along the lines of not make complete and total fools of ourselves, but way to think positive.”

She laughs, as I intended her to, then bounds off the bed and starts layering up big-time. Which...finally, someone at this ridiculous school who has some sense. Between the jerks I met the first night and then Jaxon and Lia, I'm beginning to think

everyone in this place has some bizarre immunity to cold. Like maybe they're aliens and I'm the ignorant and fragile human living among them.

After we both finish getting dressed in—I counted this time—six layers, she herds me toward the door. “Come on, we don’t want to be late or we’ll totally get ambushed.”

“Ambushed. With snowballs. Sounds fantastic.” San Diego has never looked so good.

“Just wait. You’re going to love it. Plus, it’ll give you a chance to meet all of Flint’s friends.” She checks her makeup one more time in the mirror by the door, then all but shoves me into the hallway.

“All of Flint’s friends?” I ask as we make our way through the halls. “Exactly how many people are going to be at this thing?”

“I don’t know. At least fifty.”

“Fifty people? At a snowball fight?”

“Maybe more. Probably more.”

“How does that even work?” I query.

“Does it matter?” she answers, brows raised.

“Yes, it matters. I mean, how can you possibly keep track of that many people trying to throw things at you?”

“I don’t think you keep track of them so much as try to flatten everyone you come across without being flattened yourself.”

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe the altitude sickness is coming back.”

“Too late.” She links her arm through mine and grins. “We’re almost there.”

“So can you be a little more specific about who all is going to be there? Anyone I’ve already met—I mean, besides Flint?”

“I don’t know if Lia will be there. Cam won’t—he and Flint don’t really get along. It’s a...thing.”

I think about asking exactly what kind of thing she’s

referring to, but the truth is, I don't care if Lia shows up. Or Cam. There's only one person I'm trying to find out about, and since Macy isn't getting there herself, I guess I really am going to have to ask.

"How about Jaxon?" I keep my voice light even though, after our encounter earlier, my heart is pounding at the mere mention of his name. "Is he going to be there?"

"Jaxon Vega?" By the time she gets to the second syllable of Jaxon's name, her voice is little more than a squeak.

"He's the one we saw in the hall that first day, right?"

"Yeah. Um...yeah." Macy gives up any pretense of chill—and of walking, as it turns out. Instead, she turns to me, hands on her hips, and demands, "Why are you asking about Jaxon?"

"I don't know. We've met a couple of times, and I just wondered if he was into snowball fights."

"You've met *Jaxon Vega* a couple of times? How exactly did you meet, considering I've been with you almost all the time since you got here?"

"I don't know, just walking around the school. It was only a few times."

"A few times?" Her eyes almost bug out of her head. "That's more than a couple. Where? When? *How*?"

"Why are you being so weird about this?" I'm seriously beginning to regret bringing Jaxon up. I mean, she was freaked out over Flint, but it was a fun kind of freaked out. Right now, it looks more like she's going to blow a gasket. "He was in the hallway; I was in the hallway. It just kind of happened."

"Things don't *just happen* with Jaxon. He's not exactly known for being talkative with anyone outside of—" She stops abruptly.

"Outside of what?" I prompt.

"I don't know. Just..."

"Just?" I ask. She smiles a little sickly but doesn't say anything

else, and it annoys me. Like, seriously annoys me. “Why do you keep doing that?”

“Doing what?”

“You start sentences and then never finish them. Or you start to say something and halfway through change what you were saying to something else entirely.”

“I don’t—”

“You do. All the time. And honestly, it’s beginning to feel a little weird. Like there’s some kind of secret I’m not supposed to know. What’s going on?”

“That’s ridiculous, Grace.” She looks at me like I’m a few snowflakes short of a snowball. “Katmere is just, you know, full of all kinds of weird cliques and social rules. I didn’t want to bore you with them all.”

“Because you’d rather I commit social suicide?” I arch my brow at her.

She rolls her eyes. “Social suicide is the last thing you need to worry about here.”

It’s the first real thing she’s said since we started this conversation, and I jump on it. “So what *do* I have to worry about, then?”

Macy sighs, low and long and just a little sad. But then she looks me in the eye and says, “All I was going to say is that Jaxon’s not very friendly with people who aren’t in the Order.”

“*The Order*? What’s that?”

“It’s nothing, really.” When I keep looking at her, silently pushing her to continue, she sighs again, then adds, “It’s just a nickname we gave the most popular boys at school because they’re always together.”

I think about the guys Jaxon walked into the party with and the ones who were with him in the hall when Flint was carrying me to my room. At the time, I remember thinking that Jaxon

looked like the leader, but I didn't think much of it. I was too busy trying not to stare at him.

Based on my recollections, Macy's explanation is reasonable. Still, there's something about the way she says it—and the way she's looking everywhere but in my eyes—that makes me think there's more to the story than she's letting on.

Although, standing in the middle of the hallway doesn't seem like the best place to keep pushing at her, especially since we really are going to be late if we don't get moving.

With that in mind, I start walking and Macy does, too, but she sticks close to my side. I give her a weird look, wondering what she's up to, at least until she asks in a kind of stage whisper, "Have you met the others, too?"

"The other guys in the Order?" I feel a little ridiculous just saying the name out loud. I mean, they're twelfth-grade students at a boarding school, not running a monastery in Tibet. "No. I've only met Jaxon."

"*Only*? You mean he was *alone*?" Now she doesn't just look worried; she looks downright sick.

"Yeah. So?"

"Oh God! What did he do? Are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

"Jaxon?" I can't keep the surprise from my voice.

"Of course Jaxon! That *is* who we're talking about, right?"

"No, he didn't *hurt* me. Why would you even think that?"

She throws her hands in the air, frustration and fear evident in every line of her body. "Because he's Jaxon. He's a one-man demolition crew. It's what he does!"

"He was..." I shake my head, try to think of the right word to describe our interactions. Then go with generic because I figure Macy won't get it anyway. "Most of the time he was actually kind of...interesting."

"Interesting?" This time she looks at me like I just said I

wanted to bodysurf the Alaskan tundra. “Okay, I’m confused. Are you sure we’re talking about the same Jaxon?” She pulls me into the nearest alcove, then grabs my hands and squeezes them tightly. “Really tall, really gorgeous, *really scary*? Black hair, black eyes, black clothes, and a smoking-hot body? Plus the arrogance of a rock star...or the self-proclaimed dictator of a not-so-small country?”

I’ve got to admit, it’s a pretty good description—especially the *arrogant* part. And the *really gorgeous* part, even if it doesn’t take into account a lot of the things that make him so attractive. Like his eyes that see way too much and the way his voice gets all dark and growly when he expects things to go his way. Not to mention the thin scar that turns him from merely pretty to sexy. And also scary as hell. “Yeah, that’s him.”

“You know you don’t have to lie, right? You can tell me what happened. I swear I won’t tell anyone if you don’t want me to.”

“You won’t tell anyone what?” I’m thoroughly confused now. Because while it might have been a stretch to call Jaxon interesting, I can’t imagine why the fact that I’ve met him is eliciting this kind of response from my cousin.

“What he did to you?” She starts looking me over, like she’s searching for some proof that I survived a rabid Jaxon attack.

“He didn’t *do* anything, Macy.” A little impatient now, I pull my hands from hers. “I mean, he wasn’t Gandhi. But he helped me out when I needed it, and he sure as hell didn’t hurt me. Why is that so hard to believe?”

“Because Jaxon Vega isn’t helpful to anyone. Ever.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“Well, you should.” She enunciates each word in an obvious attempt to make sure I listen to—and understand—what she’s saying. “Because he’s dangerous, Grace. *Very* dangerous, and you should stay as far away from him as you possibly can.”

I start to tell her that he's not the dangerous one, but then I remember the way Marc and Quinn fell right into line the second he showed up. It was hard to miss the fear on their faces, and not just because he'd sent them flying across the room.

Now that I think back on it, they *had* been scared of him. Like, really scared.

"I'm serious. You need to be careful of him. If he really was helpful to you, it's only because he wants something. And even that seems strange, because Jaxon takes what he wants. Always has, always will."

I've been here three days and even I know that's not true. Which is probably why I say, "Jaxon's the one who kept Marc and Quinn from throwing me out in the snow, Macy. I don't think he did it because he wanted something from me."

"Wait. *He's* the one?"

"Yes, he is. Why would he do that if he's such a bad guy?"

"I don't know." She looks stunned. "But just because he helped you once doesn't mean he'll do it again. So be careful with him, okay?"

"He's not the one who tried to kill me."

She snorts. "Yeah, well, you've only been here a few days. Give it time."

"That's..." For long seconds, I trip over my tongue as I try to find a comeback that will show her how absurd she sounds. But in the end, I can't get past the annoyance her words cause and end up saying exactly what I'm thinking. "A really awful thing to say."

"Just because it's awful doesn't make it any less true." She gives me a no-nonsense look that seems incongruous with her normally effervescent personality. "You need to trust me on this."

"Macy..."

"I'm serious. Don't worry about me being too harsh." She

narrows her eyes at me in obvious warning. “And don’t worry about Jaxon Vega. Unless you’re trying to figure out how to stay as far away from him as possible.”

Behind her, something catches my eye, and my mouth goes dry. “Yeah, well, that might be a problem.” I barely manage to get the words out past my suddenly tight throat.

“And why is that exactly?”

“Because I’m not going anywhere.” Jaxon’s low, amused voice cuts through my cousin’s umbrage, has her eyes going wide and her skin draining of color. “And neither is Grace.”

18

How Many Hot Guys Does it Take to Win a Snowball Fight?

Macy squeaks—she actually squeaks—but Jaxon just raises his brows at me. The look on his face is a little amused and a lot wicked and my heart starts beating like a metronome on high.

At least until Macy hisses, “Seriously? You couldn’t tell me he was there?”

“I didn’t—”

“She didn’t know.” He looks me over from top to bottom, and for a second, just a second, a smile touches the depths of those obsidian eyes of his. “Braving the snow twice in one day? I’ve got to admit I’m impressed.”

“Don’t be too impressed. I still have to make it through the snowball fight in one piece.”

The smile drops—from his face and his eyes—as quickly as it came. “You’re playing Flint’s game?”

It sounds more like an accusation than a question, though I don’t know why. “Isn’t that why you’re here?”

“For a *snowball* fight?” He shakes his head, makes a dismissive sound deep in his throat. “I don’t think so.”

“Oh, well...” That got awkward fast. “Um. We should probably...”

“Get going,” Macy finishes.

Jaxon ignores her as he braces a hand on the wall behind me. Then he leans in and, in a voice so low I have to strain to hear him, murmurs, “You’re determined not to listen to me, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” I whisper back, but I can’t look him in the face as I say it. Not when I’m lying—I know exactly what he’s talking about—and not when his breath is so warm and soft against my ear that I can feel it everywhere, even deep inside.

“It really is for your own good,” he tells me, still standing way too close. Heat slams through me—at his words and his proximity and the orange and dark-water scent of him currently wrapping itself around me.

“What—” My voice breaks, my throat so tight and dry, I can barely force the words through it when I try again. “What is?”

“You shouldn’t go to that snowball fight with Flint.” He pulls back, his gaze catching and holding mine. “And you sure as hell shouldn’t be wandering around the school grounds on your own. You’re not *safe* here.”

It’s not the first time he’s implied that Katmere is dangerous for me. And I get it. I do. Alaska is no picnic for the uninitiated. But I’m with Macy, on school grounds. No way is she going to let anything happen to me.

“I’ll be fine.” It’s easier to breathe now that Jaxon’s mouth isn’t a scant inch from my ear, but finding words is still harder than it should be under his watchful gaze. “I’m not planning on wandering off tonight. I’ll be with the group the whole time.”

“Yeah.” He doesn’t sound impressed. “That’s what I’m worried about.”

“What do you mean?” I clarify. “I thought you’d be relieved I’m not planning on tackling any wild animals with my bare hands.”

“It’s not the *wild* animals I’m concerned about.”

Before I can ask him what *that* means, Macy interjects again. “We should get going. We don’t want to be late.”

“Well, whatever you’re concerned about, you shouldn’t be,” I tell him, refusing to be pulled away before I’m ready. “I’m a big girl. I can take care of myself. But if you want, you can join us.”

“Join you.” His tone implies I just suggested that we fly to Mars under our own power.

But I refuse to be dissuaded. Not when Jaxon is standing so close to me instead of pulling his usual disappearing act. “It’ll be fun. And I’m sure Flint won’t mind.”

“You’re sure he won’t mind.” He repeats my words, and again it isn’t a question. He’s back to seeming amused, though—at least if you don’t look too closely at his eyes. They’re flat now, completely empty in a way I haven’t seen since he looked through me at the party. “Because I’ve got to tell you, I’m pretty sure he will.”

“Why would he? He invited a ton of people.” I turn to look at Macy, who has gone absolutely sheet white.

I roll my eyes at her, annoyed she seems so freaked out at the idea of hanging with Jaxon, but before I can say anything, Flint walks up behind me and puts his hands on my shoulders. “Hey, Grace. Looks like you’re ready to get your snowball on.”

“I am, actually.” I turn and end up grinning at him because it’s impossible not to. He’s just that fun *and* that charming. Not to mention the fact that he’s wearing a snow hat in the shape of a fire-breathing dragon that looks absolutely ridiculous. “In fact, I was trying to talk Jaxon into joining us.”

“Oh really?” Flint’s eyes go a kind of burning amber as he looks from me to Jaxon. “What do you say, Vega? Wanna fight?”

Flint’s smiling, but even I can tell it’s not a friendly invitation... and that’s before three other guys in all black join us, arranging themselves in a semicircle right behind Jaxon. For the first time,

the phrase “got your back” makes sense to me, because it’s very obvious that’s why these guys are here. To have Jaxon’s back. I just don’t know from what.

These must be members of the infamous Order Macy was telling me about. And I can see why they got the nickname—there’s a closeness among the four of these guys that even I can’t miss. A bond that seems to be about a lot more than simple friendship.

Flint feels it, too. I can tell by the way he stiffens and the way he shifts his weight forward onto his toes, like he’s just waiting for Jaxon to throw the first punch. More, like he’s hoping for it.

Which...no. Just no. I don’t care if there’s suddenly enough testosterone in our little alcove to start the next world war; it’s not going to happen. At least not while Macy and I are standing directly in the middle.

“Come on.” I grab my cousin’s arm. “Let’s go figure out a way to win this snowball fight.”

That gets both Jaxon’s and Flint’s attention. “Those are big words coming from someone who never saw snow before she got here three days ago,” Flint teases, and while the tension isn’t gone, it’s way lower than it was a few seconds ago—exactly as I intended.

“Yeah, well, you know me. All about the bravado.” I keep a firm grip on Macy’s arm as I start to maneuver around Jaxon and his friends.

“Is that what you call it?” Jaxon murmurs in my ear as I slide past him. Once more, his warm breath is against the side of my neck, and a shiver that has nothing to do with the cold works its way down my spine.

Our eyes meet, and for a second, just a second, the whole world seems to drop away. Macy, Flint, the other students who are laughing and chattering as they move past us on their way

to the door all disappear until it's just Jaxon and me and the electricity that arcs between us.

My breath catches in my throat, my whole body grows warm, and it takes real, physical effort to stop myself from reaching out and touching him.

I think he must be having the same problem, because his hand comes up, hovers in the air between us for one long, infinite moment.

"Grace." It's barely a whisper, but still I feel it all the way inside myself. I wait, breath held, for him to say something—anything—else, but before he can, the front door flies open, letting in a huge gust of freezing air.

It breaks the spell, and suddenly we're just two people standing in a crowded hallway again. Disappointment wells inside me, especially when Jaxon takes a step back, his face set once again in inscrutable lines.

I wait for him to say something, but he doesn't. Instead, he just watches as Flint herds Macy and me toward the open door. As we cross the threshold, I raise my hand in a small goodbye wave.

I don't expect him to return it, and he doesn't. But just as I turn away to take my first step outside, he says, "Don't forget to build an arsenal."

They're pretty much the last words I expect to hear from him...or anyone, for that matter. "An arsenal?"

"It's the most important part of winning a snowball fight. Find a base you can protect and concentrate on building up your arsenal. Only attack when you're sure you have enough ammunition to win."

Snowballs. Here I was, convinced we had just shared a moment, and he's thinking about snowballs. Fan-freaking-tastic.

"Ummm...thanks for the advice?" I give him a WTF look.

Jaxon responds with his regular, annoying blank face, but I swear his eyes are sparkling just a little. “It’s good advice. You should take it.”

“Why don’t *you* take it? Join me and the two of us can build a bigger arsenal.”

He lifts a brow. “And here I thought that’s exactly what I have been doing.”

“What does *that* mean?” I demand.

But he’s already turning away, already *walking* away, and I’m left staring after him.

As usual.

Damn it.

Something tells me this boy—and his world-famous disappearing act—is going to be the death of me.

19

We Came, We Fought, I Froze

“Jaxon Vega, huh?” Flint asks as the cold slaps me in the face for the second time today.

“Don’t start,” I say, giving him the side eye.

“I’m not,” he answers, holding both hands up in mock surrender. “I swear.” He’s silent for a minute or so as the three of us concentrate on trudging through the snow toward everyone else. And can I just say that I’m pretty sure Macy undersold the crowd when she said fifty people. Even in the weird civil twilight that surrounds us on all sides, it looks more like a hundred, maybe even the whole damn school—minus Jaxon and his friends, of course.

On the plus side, at least they’re all wearing hats and scarves and coats...which I’m taking to mean that not everyone in this place is an actual alien. Thankfully.

“I just didn’t know ‘screwed-up and obnoxious’ was your type, that’s all.”

I shoot him a glare. “I thought you weren’t starting.”

“I’m not. I’m just looking out for you. Jaxon is—”

“*Not* screwed up.”

He laughs. “I notice you didn’t even try to say he wasn’t

obnoxious, though, did you? And no offense, Grace, but you're new here. You have no idea just how fucked-up he is."

"And you do?"

"Yeah. And so does Macy. Right, Mace?"

Macy doesn't answer, just keeps walking and pretends like she doesn't hear him. I'm beginning to wish I could do the same.

"All right, all right, I get it." Flint shakes his head. "I won't say anything else against the Chosen One. Except tell you to be careful."

"We're friends, Flint."

"Yeah, well, take it from someone who knows. Jaxon doesn't have friends."

I want to ask him what he means by that, considering Jaxon's got the Order, and they seem pretty damn close to me, but we've reached the first row of trees, where the others are gathered. Plus, I'm the one who just said I didn't want to talk about Jaxon. If I start asking questions, that gives Flint *carte blanche* to say whatever he wants, and that doesn't seem fair, since Jaxon isn't around to defend himself.

Flint walks into the middle of the group like he owns the place. Then again, judging from the way the others respond to him, maybe he does. It's not that they all come to attention, necessarily. It's just obvious that they all really want him to notice them...and they all really want to hear what he has to say.

I can't help wondering what that kind of popularity is like. I don't want it—would probably melt under the pressure of it in less than twenty-four hours. But I do wonder what it feels like. And how Flint feels about it.

I don't have long to dwell on my thoughts, though, because Flint gets started giving a quick rundown of the rules—starting with one that sounds an awful lot like *there are no rules*, except it's followed by the one that says if you get hit by five snowballs,

you're out—and then disperses the crowd. As the five-minute countdown starts, he grabs Macy's and my hands and starts running with us toward a large thicket of evergreen and aspen trees several hundred yards away.

"We've got two minutes to find a good spot," he says. "Another two and a half to get things together. Then it's open season."

"But if everyone finds a spot, who will we have to throw sno—"

"They won't," Flint and Macy interrupt me at the exact same time.

"Don't worry," Flint tells me as we finally reach the trees. "There will be plenty of people to wage war on."

Wage war? I can barely breathe. It's a combination of the high altitude and cold air, I know, but I can't help feeling self-conscious about the way I'm huffing and puffing. Especially since he and Macy both sound like they just finished a leisurely garden stroll.

"So what do we do now?" I ask, even though it's fairly obvious, considering Flint is already scooping up snow and making it into balls.

"Build up our arsenal." He gives me a wicked grin. "Just because I think Jaxon is a jackass doesn't mean the guy doesn't know strategy."

We spend the next couple of minutes making as many snowballs as we possibly can. I half expect Macy and Flint to outpace me here, too, but it turns out all those years of making pastries and patting dough into balls with my mother paid off, because I am an *excellent* snowball maker. Totally kick-ass. And I'm twice as fast as they are.

"Coming up on five minutes," Macy says, her phone ringing with a fifteen-second warning.

"Move, move, move," Flint calls out, even as he shoos me behind the closest tree.

Just in time, too, because as soon as Macy's phone screeches out the five-minute mark, all hell breaks loose.

People drop from the trees all around us, snowballs flying fast and furious in every direction. Others run by at breakneck speeds, lobbing them kamikaze-style at anyone within range.

One snowball whizzes right past my ear, and I breathe a sigh of relief until another one slams into my side—even with the tree, and Flint, for cover.

"That's one," I hiss, jerking to the right to avoid another snowball flying straight at me. It hits Flint in the shoulder instead, and he mutters a low curse.

"Are we going to hide back here all day?" Macy demands from where she's crouched at the base of a nearby tree. "Or are we going to get in this thing?"

"By all means," Flint says, gesturing for her to go first.

She rolls her eyes at him, but it takes her only a few seconds to scoop snow into a couple of giant snowballs. Then she's letting her snowballs fly with a giant war whoop that practically shakes the snow off the nearby branches, before running toward our arsenal to reload.

I follow her into the fray, a snowball clutched in my gloved hands as I wait for a perfect opportunity to use it.

The opportunity presents itself when one of the large guys from Flint's group comes barreling toward me, snowballs hidden in the bottom of the jacket he's turned into a carrying pouch. He sends them flying at me, one after another, but I manage to dodge them all. Then I throw my snowball as hard as I can, straight at him. It hits him in his very surprised face.

We've built up about a hundred snowballs in our arsenal, and we use them all as more and more people pour through the forest, looking for a place to hide as they catch their breath and try to make a few extra snowballs of their own.

I'm a little surprised at how close-knit the groups are—and how alliances transcend snowball teams and seem to revert back to the factions I noticed at the party yesterday. Even though members of Flint's clique are divided into duos and trios, they all seem to come together and watch one another's backs when someone from one of the other factions—whether it's the slender group dressed in bright jewel tones or the more muscular group that Marc and Quinn are currently fighting with—threatens one of them.

I also notice that one group is missing—Jaxon's. Not just the Order, which is definitely not here, but the whole black-clothed designer faction that presided over the party with such obvious disdain. Guess Jaxon was right when he said Flint didn't want him here. Part of me wants to try to figure out what is up with that, but right now I'm too busy dodging snowball volleys to do more than give it a passing thought.

It's total guerrilla warfare out here—fast and brutal and winner takes all. It's also the most fun I've had since my parents died, and probably even longer than that.

We exhaust our supply of snowballs pretty quickly, and then we're just like everyone else, running through the trees, trying to find cover as we fling snow at whoever's within reach.

I laugh like a hyena the whole time. Macy and Flint look bemused at first, but soon they're laughing with me—especially when one or the other of us gets hit.

It's after an ambush that leads to Macy getting her fourth hit and Flint and me getting our third ones that we decide to get serious. We find the biggest two trees we can to hide behind, and we drop to our knees, packing snowballs as quickly as possible. After we've got about thirty made, Flint yanks off his hat and scarf and starts piling them inside.

"What are you doing?" I demand. "You're going to freeze to death out here."

“I’m fine,” he tells me as he turns his scarf into a kind of carrying pack. “This is our chance to win.”

“How?” I ask. There’s chaos all around us, and though the others haven’t found our hiding spot yet, it’s only a matter of time—probably a minute or two—before they do. And while we’ve got ammunition, there’s also a lot fewer of us than there is of them.

“By climbing the trees,” Macy tells me.

Before I can express my utter incredulity at the thought of climbing one of the gigantic, leafless aspens—the lowest branches are more than fifteen feet off the ground—she runs straight at the trunk of the closest tree, then jumps and kicks out hard enough to send herself soaring up several feet at an angle, arms extended, to grab the branch of a neighboring tree. She hangs there for a few seconds, swinging back and forth to gain momentum, then thrusts herself up and onto a nearby branch.

The whole thing takes about ten seconds.

“Did she just do parkour against that tree?” I ask Flint before turning to Macy. “Did you just parkour that tree?”

“I did,” she says with a laugh, then reaches down to catch the hat full of snowballs Flint sends flying her way.

“That’s freaking awesome. But if you guys expect me to be able to do that, I think we’re all going to be disappointed.”

“Don’t worry, Grace,” Flint tells me as he thrusts his snowball-packed scarf into my arms. “Just hold on to these for me, will you?”

“Of course. What are you going to—?” I let out a screech as he grabs onto me and throws me over his shoulder.

“Quiet down or you’re going to give away our hiding place,” he tells me as he starts climbing the tree like some Alaskan version of Spider-Man, hands and feet practically sticking to the tree’s bark as he carries me up the gigantic trunk. “And don’t drop the snowballs.”

“You should have thought of that before you decided to hang me upside down,” I snark at him. But I tighten my grip on the scarf.

I don’t know how he’s doing it, and I wouldn’t believe it if I wasn’t witnessing—or should I say experiencing—it for myself. But thirty seconds later, I’m straddling a tree branch, snowballs in hand, as I wait to ambush the first people who come by.

Flint’s on a branch several feet above mine. It’s high enough off the ground to make me whimper just looking up at him, but he’s standing there with a huge grin on his face, like balancing on a snow-packed tree branch is the easiest thing in the world.

Which, to be clear, it definitely is not. And I know that because I’m *sitting* on one and I still feel like I could slip off at any second.

“Someone’s coming!” Macy hisses from one tree over.

I glance down at the ground and realize she’s right—Quinn, Marc, and two other guys are heading our way. They’re moving stealthily instead of quickly, almost like they know we’re here. And maybe they do—it’s not like I was exactly quiet while Flint hauled me up this tree.

Either way, it doesn’t matter, because all we need is for them to get a few steps closer and—

Bam. Flint sends a snowball soaring straight into the leader’s chest. Macy follows up with a one-two shot to the guy in the back. Which leaves Marc and Quinn. Which I’m definitely not going to complain about. I send a volley of snowballs straight at them, one after another. I hit Marc twice and Quinn at least four times, which—if their curse-laden complaints are anything to go by—knocks them completely out of the game. Something I’m also not going to complain about.

Flint is all but crowing in triumph as he dispatches a second group that made the mistake of coming this way, and Macy takes care of a couple of loners trying to sneak in from behind

us. I restock from the thick snow on the branches and wait for whoever comes next.

Turns out it's a couple of girls dressed in teal and navy outerwear, who look like they're having about as much fun as I do at the dentist.

I think about pulling my punches—no reason to make them even more miserable—but I figure it's only putting off the inevitable. The faster I knock them out of the game, the faster they can head back to the castle. And the faster we can win this thing.

I reach for my last three snowballs and am just waiting for them to come within range when a powerful wind comes up and knocks me off balance. I make a grab for the tree trunk and manage to hold on while the wind shakes the whole tree.

Flint curses and makes a grab for the trunk, too. Then calls to me, "Hold on, Grace! I'll be there in a minute."

"Just stay there," I call back. "I'm fine."

Then I turn to look for Macy, worried my cousin might be in worse shape than I am. But just as I turn my head to look behind me, another gust of wind hits the tree, hard. It's an eerie sound, and as the trunk starts to sway under the wind's assault, I get more nervous. Especially when another gust comes through and hits me hard enough to threaten my grip on the tree.

Above me, Flint curses again, and Macy yells, "Hold on, Grace! Flint, go get her!"

"Wait!" I shout back to be heard over the wind. "Don't!"

But then Macy screams, and I whirl around, terrified I'm going to see her plunging to her death. And that's when the worst gust of wind yet hits, and I lose my grip on the tree completely.

I scramble to grab on to something—anything—but the wind is too strong. The branch I'm sitting on issues an ominous crack.

And then I'm falling.

20

There's Never a Parachute Around When You Need One

For one second, I have perfect clarity—I can hear Macy screaming, Flint calling my name, the wind roaring like a freight train—and then it's all drowned out in the panicked beat of my heart as terror races through me.

I brace myself for bone-crunching impact, but before I hit, Flint is grabbing me, pulling me against him, spinning us in midair. He hits the ground, back first, and I land on him, my face buried in the curve of his neck.

We hit hard enough that the breath is knocked out of me. For one second, two, three, I can't do anything but lay there on top of him, trying desperately to drag a breath into my abused lungs.

Flint's not moving either, and panic is a wild animal inside me as I struggle to get my weight off him. His eyes are closed, and I'm terrified that he's hurt—or worse. He took the brunt of the fall, deliberately spinning us so that he slammed into the hard, snow-packed ground while all I slammed into was him.

It's as I push up into a sitting position, knees on either side of his thighs, that I finally manage to pull in a huge gulp of air. It's also at that moment that all hell breaks loose.

Macy is screaming my name as she scrambles down her tree,

and people swarm us from all directions. I'm too busy shaking Flint and slapping at his cheeks—trying to get him to respond—to pay any attention to what anyone else is doing.

At least until he opens his eyes and drawls, "I'm beginning to think I should have let you fall."

"Oh my God! You're okay!" I scramble off him. "*Are you okay?*"

"I think so." He sits up with a little groan. "You're heavier than you look."

"You shouldn't move!" I try to shove him back down, but he just laughs.

"The snow broke my fall, Grace. I'm good." To prove it, he jackknifes to his feet in one lithe movement.

It's as he stands up that I realize he's telling the truth. There's a Flint-shaped indentation in the snow from where he hit. For the first time since moving to this state, I'm grateful for its ridiculous climate. After all, when you're falling twenty feet, snow is so much softer than ground.

Still, if that's the case... "Why did you jump after me? You could have been hurt."

He doesn't answer, just kind of stands there watching me, a weird look in his eyes. It's not concern or annoyance or pride or any of the other expressions I'd expect him to be wearing right now. Instead, it looks an awful lot like...shame.

But that doesn't make sense. He just saved me from a concussion or a couple of broken bones—at least. What does he have to be ashamed of?

"What was the alternative?" Macy demands, voice shaking like she just got back the power of speech. "Let you be hurt?"

"You mean it's better for Flint to get hurt?" I ask bewildered.

"But he didn't, did he? And neither did you." She turns to him with a grateful look. "Thank you so much, Flint."

Her words make me realize that I've been too busy worrying about—and yelling at—Flint to do what I should have right away. “Thank you. I really appreciate it.”

The words sound awkward after all my admonishments, but they are nothing compared to the look on Flint's face as he stares over my shoulder into the crowd. It alternates between looking like he's going to throw a punch and like he's dying to run away.

I figure it's because he's bad with gratitude—I'm terrible with it, so I get that—but as the talking in the crowd dies down and people start parting like a human Red Sea, I turn.

And nearly wither on the spot at the coldness in Jaxon's eyes. Only the fact that it's directed at Flint and not me keeps my knees from giving way completely. Because I only thought he was intimidating at the welcome party.

Right now, the look on his face is absolutely terrifying. And the five inscrutable guys at his back—I assume I'm seeing the whole of the infamous Order for the first time—only reinforce the fact that there's a problem.

A big problem.

I just wish I knew why.

Even Flint, who has never reacted to Jaxon in the past, turns a little sickly looking. And that's before Jaxon, in the coldest, most reasonable voice imaginable, asks him, “What the hell did you think you were doing?”

It's the tone even more than the look that has me moving, a frisson of fear working its way down my spine as I position myself between him and Flint before an all-out brawl can take place. I may not understand all the nuances of what's happening here, but it's obvious that Jaxon is livid—and more than ready to take it out on Flint. Which makes no sense, considering, “I fell, Jaxon. Flint saved me.”

For the first time, he turns those cold eyes on me. “Did he?”

“Yes! The wind kicked up, and I lost my balance. I fell out of the tree, and Flint jumped after me.” I shoot Flint a stare, telling him to back me up, but he’s not looking at me.

He’s not looking at Jaxon, either. Instead, he’s gazing off into the distance, jaw and fists clenched.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, reaching out to touch his shoulder. “Are you hurt after all?”

A fine tremor runs through the earth, a tiny little earthquake that rattles the tree branches a bit but doesn’t do anything else. I’ve heard Alaska has them, so it doesn’t surprise me when no one reacts. Even I don’t get too excited. In San Diego, we’d have one or two of these tiny ones every couple of months. Flint doesn’t even notice. He’s too busy shrugging off my hand. “I’m fine, Grace.”

“Then what’s wrong?” I look back and forth between him and Jaxon. “I don’t understand what’s happening here.”

Neither of them answers me, so I look to Macy for an explanation beyond my working hypothesis that Alaska brings out the worst in people. But she looks as confused as I do—and about a hundred times more terrified.

As for everybody else...they’re riveted by the drama, eyes glued to Jaxon as he continues to watch Flint who continues to very obviously not watch him back. It’s not the first time I’ve thought of Jaxon as a hunter, but it is the first time I’ve thought of Flint as prey. Other members of his group must agree, because in seconds they’re moving, guys and girls alike, to flank him on either side.

Their obvious support of Flint only ups the tension between him and Jaxon, whose face has grown even more coldly amused.

I’m trying desperately to figure out how to break things up without bloodshed when Macy suddenly snaps out of whatever stupor she’s been in and says, “We should go back to the room,

Grace. Make sure you're okay."

"I'm fine," I assure her. Like I'm going to leave Jaxon out here when he looks like he wants to rip Flint's throat out just for breathing. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Actually, that's the best idea I've heard all afternoon." Jaxon takes a step closer until he's right behind me. He doesn't touch me, doesn't even brush against me, but he's close enough that that doesn't matter. I can *feel* him. "I'll walk you back to your room."

The crowd recoils at this. Like, I actually see people drawing back, eyes wide, mouths open, faces slack with shock. I can't figure out what the big deal is unless it's that Jaxon is breaking up the showdown between the two most popular guys in school before it even begins. Not that it's even a real showdown, considering the way Flint's taken himself out of the whole thing by refusing to so much as acknowledge Jaxon's existence.

It's that uncharacteristic behavior more than anything else that has me stepping away from Jaxon and saying, "I need to stay with Flint. Make sure he's really—"

"I'm fine, Grace," Flint grates out from between clenched teeth. "Just go."

"Are you sure?" I reach out a hand to touch his shoulder again, but suddenly Jaxon's there between us, preventing my hand from landing. Then he's stepping forward, moving me slowly, inexorably away from Flint and back toward school.

It's the strangest thing I've ever seen. Definitely the strangest thing I've ever been a part of.

And still, I let it happen. Because this is Jaxon, and I can't seem to help myself.

"Come on, Macy," I say quietly to my cousin and reach for her hand. "Let's go."

She nods, and then we're walking back toward the castle—Macy, Jaxon, and me. I half expect the other members of the

Order to join us, but a quick glance behind me shows that they aren't moving.

No one is.

And can I just say, I'm beginning to feel an awful lot like Alice in Wonderland here—things keep getting “curiouser and curiouser.” Maybe that last plane ride with Philip was really a trip down a really big rabbit hole.

We walk in silence for a minute or two, and with each step, I'm beginning to realize that maybe I didn't escape from the fall unscathed after all. Now that the adrenaline has worn off, my right ankle is hurting. A lot.

To keep my mind off the pain—and to keep Jaxon and Macy from noticing that I'm limping—I ask, “What are you doing out here anyway? I thought you weren't going to join the snowball fight.”

“Good thing I *was* out here, considering the mess Flint got you into.” Jaxon doesn't so much as glance my way.

“It really is no big deal,” I tell him, despite the fact that my ankle is working its way up from painful to excruciating pretty quickly now. “Flint had me. He—”

“Flint very definitely did not have you,” he snaps, his voice as hard and brittle as the ice all around us as he turns to face me for the first time. “In fact—” He stops, eyes narrowing. “What's wrong?”

“Besides not being able to figure out why you're so mad?”

He shrugs off the question as he looks me over from head to toe. “What's hurting you?”

“I'm fine.”

“You're hurt, Grace?” Macy joins the conversation for the first time. The chicken.

“It's nothing.” We've got a head start, but if we stop, the others are sure to catch up with us, and the last thing I need right

now is to make an even bigger spectacle of myself. So much for fitting in...or even *blending* in. After tonight, I might as well be painted biohazard orange. Something I find particularly ironic, since Jaxon is the one who told me to keep my head down.

But seriously. It's just like San Diego all over again. There, I was the girl whose parents died. Here, I'm the girl who fell out of a tree and nearly caused World War III between the two hottest guys in school.

FML.

Determined to make it back to school and my room before the others head this way, I start walking again. Or, should I say, I try to start walking again, because I don't get very far before Jaxon is blocking my path.

"What hurts?" he asks again, and the look on his face tells me he's not going to let it go.

And since arguing with him wastes precious seconds, I finally give in. "My ankle. I must have twisted it when we hit the ground."

Jaxon's kneeling at my feet before I finish, gently probing at my foot and ankle through my boot. "I can't take this off out here or you'll get frostbite. But does it hurt when I do this?"

My gasp is the only answer he needs.

"Should I run ahead and get the snowmobile?" Macy asks. "I can be back before too long."

Oh my God, no. Talk about making a spectacle of myself. "I can walk. Honest. I'm okay."

Jaxon shoots both of us an incredulous look as he helps me to my feet. Then, without a word, he swoops me into his arms.

I Like Standing on
My Own Two Feet, but
Getting Swept Off Them Feels
Surprisingly Good, Too

For long seconds, I can't move. I can't think. I can only stare up at him in a kind of openmouthed shock as my brain short-circuits. Because I'm not actually in Jaxon's arms, right? I mean, I can't be.

Except I am. And they feel really good around me. *Really* good. Plus, being in his arms, bride-style, gives me an up-close-and-personal view of his face. And can I just say how unfair it is that he's even hotter from an inch away? And he smells amazing, too.

His smell—like snow and orange—is what pushes me over the edge, what has me struggling against him like a madwoman in my effort to be put back down. Because if he carries me all the way to school looking and smelling and feeling like he does, I'm going to be a total incoherent mess.

"Can you please stop wiggling around so much?" he demands as I attempt to push myself out of his arms.

"Just let me down, then." I glance at Macy for support, but she's staring at us like she thinks she might be getting punked. Since she's clearly not going to be any help, I turn back to Jaxon. "You can't carry me all the way back to school!"

There isn't so much as a hitch in his stride. "Watch me."

"Jaxon, be reasonable. It's a long walk."

"What's your point?"

I squirm around some more, trying to force him to put me down, but that just makes him tighten his hold.

"My point is I'm too heavy."

Again with the incredulous look.

"I'm serious." I put my hands on his chest and use real effort to push. His arms don't budge from around me. If I'm being honest, I really don't want him to put me down. My ankle is full-on throbbing now, and walking on it is going to be a nightmare. But that doesn't mean I should let him damage himself trying to help me. "Put me down before you hurt yourself."

"Hurt myself?" The eyebrow arch I spent way too much time thinking about last night is back. "Are you *trying* to insult me?"

"I'm trying to get you to let go of me. You can't carry me all the way back to—"

"Grace?" he interrupts.

I wait for him to say something, but when he doesn't, I answer, "What?" in what could, perhaps, be described as not the nicest tone.

"Shut up."

Part of me is super insulted at his words, and the matter-of-fact way he says them, but the part of me that's actually in control of my tongue does exactly what he asks and shuts up. I mean, I suppose there are worse things in the world than being carried by a super-sexy guy instead of struggling along in terrible pain. Maybe.

With me in Jaxon's arms, we move three times as fast as we were when I was limping with every step. Before I know it, we're through the castle doors, striding up the stairs.

When we get to our room, Macy unlocks the door and holds

the weirdass beads back as she tells Jaxon to, “Go on in.”

Seconds later, he deposits me on my bed and I think that’s going to be the end of it. But then he reaches down and pulls off my boot.

“I can take it from here,” I tell him. “Thanks for your help.”

He shoots me a look that tells me to shut up again, this time without him ever having uttered the words. Which embarrasses me so much that I try to pull my foot away from him and start peeling my sock off on my own.

“I sprained my ankle,” I snark. “I’m not dying of consumption.”

“Yeah, well, the night is young.”

“Hey! What’s that supposed to mean?” I glare at him.

“It means you’ve been here three days, and this is the second time I’ve had to get you out of trouble.”

“Seriously? You’re going to hold me responsible for a *windstorm* now?”

“I am.” He wraps his hand around my calf and gently but firmly eases my leg over the edge of the bed so he can look at my ankle. “You didn’t see Macy falling out of *her* tree, did you?”

“It wasn’t—” Macy starts, but no way am I going to let him get away with blaming me for this.

“*Her* branch didn’t break!” I interrupt. “*Mine* did. What was I supposed to do? Grab on to the trunk and— Oww!” I try to yank my foot away as he probes at a particularly sore spot.

He ignores me, though his touch—already soft—gets even gentler. “There’s no swelling and only a little bruising, so I don’t think you broke anything.”

“I already told you it was just sprained.” I pull my leg away, but with much less force this time. Something about the feel of his hands on my leg, his skin against mine, has me especially unnerved. “You can go now.”

This time, the look he gives me is half amused, half *don’t push*

your luck. And, despite that, also super sexy. Which is completely absurd, but that doesn't make it any less true. Heather would die if she saw me now—two small steps away from whimpering and *sighing* over some ridiculously commanding guy. It's gross, and normally I'd put him in his place. But the fact that he's all growly like this because he's worried about me and wanting to make sure I'm okay? I don't know. Somehow it makes a difference.

"Should I get ice?" Macy asks for the first time since Jaxon overrode her objection. She's currently standing near her bed, all but wringing her hands and trying not to show how freaked out she is that Jaxon is in our room.

I turn to answer—and hopefully reassure her—but realize she's talking to Jaxon. You know, the guy she spent ten minutes warning me about *before* the snowball fight. "Et tu, Brute?" I say with a roll of my eyes.

She shrugs, a little shamefaced, as Jaxon answers, "That'd be great." Then she all but runs to the door—at least until he smiles his thanks. Then she freezes. Like, actually *freezes* in the middle of walking, one foot off the floor. "Also," he adds, "do you happen to have an Ace bandage? I can wrap her foot before I go."

She doesn't answer.

"Macy?"

She still doesn't answer.

Jaxon glances at me, both brows raised, but I just roll my eyes. Then clap extra-loud to get her attention.

"Macy?"

"Oh yeah. Ice. I'm on it."

"So no bandage, then?" Jaxon asks.

"And a bandage. Yes. Absolutely. I have a few, actually." Suddenly she's stumbling over her words and her feet as she rushes to her bureau and starts wildly opening drawers.

She finally finds what she's looking for in the bottom drawer

and spins around, a tightly wrapped hot-pink bandage in her hand. “Does this work, Jaxon?”

“It’s perfect, thanks.”

She glows under his praise, and it’s all I can do not to make a teasing comment. But seriously, if she’s not careful, she’s going to turn into one of his minions. So much for *you can tell me how he hurt you*. Traitor.

I reach out to take the bandage from her, but Jaxon gets there first. “I really *can* do it, you know,” I tell him.

“Maybe I want to do it for you.”

As she heads for the door, Macy makes a sound like the melting is actually starting, and even I have to admit, it’s a good line. Then again, convincing myself to like Jaxon has never been hard. I’ve been attracted to him from the very beginning, even when I was also supremely annoyed by him.

“What? No protests?” he asks a little sardonically.

“Are you going to wrap it or not?” I grouse, ignoring his question because answering it would be too embarrassing.

He ducks his head and gets to work, but not before I see the small grin he’s got going on. His scar pulls on the very edges of his lips, but that just turns the smile into a crooked little smirk that is a million times hotter than it should be.

His fingers are cold as he wraps up my ankle, but his hands are so, so gentle. I find myself relaxing despite myself, my muscles going lax as he strokes a finger back and forth against my calf.

And when I say his name this time, even I can hear the yearning. His head snaps up, his dark, bottomless gaze locking with mine.

His hand on my leg becomes firmer, more insistent as he leans in just a little. His wildly sexy scent seems even stronger now than it did when he was carrying me. It fills my senses, makes my mouth water and my hands ache to touch him. Makes me want

to press my face into the curve of his neck and just breathe him in.

I'm already on edge from his closeness, and these new longings he sets off in me have my breath catching in my throat. My heart goes wild and, as he leans in just a little farther, my whole body lights up like the aurora borealis I'm still dying to see.

"Grace." He says my name like it's a promise. It's the last straw, and I gasp, full-on melting commencing deep inside me. I'd say his name back, but I've lost control of my vocal cords. And pretty much the rest of my body, too.

His hand comes up to cup my cheek, and I close my eyes, lean into the caress. And then nearly jump out of my skin as the door crashes open and he yanks his hand back.

"I've got the ice," Macy says. "I even crushed it up and—" She stops cold, her eyes going wide as she senses the tension in the air. With the way Jaxon is leaning over me, it doesn't take a genius to figure out what she interrupted, and for a second, it looks like she's going to ease her way back out of the room.

But then the moment is gone, and Jaxon is standing up, heading toward the door himself. "Put the ice on for twenty minutes and see how it feels. If it isn't better, ice it again in an hour. Got it?"

"Yeah, I've got it," I manage to croak out of my still-tight throat.

"Excellent." He risks giving Macy another smile, then shakes his head as she whimpers just a little. He doesn't say anything else until he's about to walk out of my room. Then he turns around, hand on the doorknob, and says, "Stay away from Flint, Grace. He's not what you think."

The words chase away the last of my vocal paralysis—and goodwill. "Flint and I are friends. And you don't get to tell me what to do." I have just enough self-control not to add, *No matter how much you intrigue me.*

I expect him to fire back with something—God knows he’s arrogant enough to believe he should be instantly obeyed—but instead he just tilts his head and watches me for several long seconds. Then he says, “Okay.”

“Okay?” I narrow my eyes at his easy acquiescence. “That’s it?”

“That’s it.” He turns to go.

“I didn’t think it would be that easy.”

He gives me his inscrutable look, the one I’m already coming to hate. “This is going to be a lot of things, Grace. Easy isn’t one of them.”

And then he’s gone. As usual.

Double damn it.

22

Baby, It's Hot in Here...

For several seconds after Jaxon leaves, I wait for the other shoe to drop...in this case, a rainbow-colored Converse in the form of Macy demanding to know what's going on between us. Which I can already see is going to be a problem on a lot of levels, most obviously the one where I have *no idea about what's going on between us*. If anything.

Yes, Jaxon has sought me out twice today, but I have no idea what that means. Or even if it means anything.

And what was that parting shot about, anyway? *This is going to be a lot of things, Grace. Easy isn't one of them?* Who even says that? Was he saying that he's interested in me? Or that he isn't?

Ugh. Why do guys have to be so complicated?

Maybe he's just playing with me because he's bored or something. Because I'm fresh meat out here in the middle of nowhere. But he didn't look bored after the snowball fight—in fact, he looked pissed as hell at Flint. Which is ridiculous, considering Flint saved me from a concussion or a broken leg or worse.

But a guy who isn't interested doesn't act like Jaxon did, right? He doesn't have the kind of temper tantrum—and it was

a tantrum, despite how cold it was—that Jaxon had in the middle of that forest because he thought Flint had put me at risk.

Does he?

I don't think so...but then, what do I know? I've only ever had one boyfriend, and the way I felt about Gabe was nothing like this. I mean, it was a decent relationship, I guess. We had been friends for years, and it just kind of drifted into something different for a while. We went places together, made out sometimes, did all the usual stuff. But it was easy with Gabe. He never made me feel like Jaxon does, never made my breath catch and my hands sweat and my stomach flip from just a look. I never spent hours obsessing over his every word, never found myself longing for his touch the way I do for Jaxon's.

I just wish I knew how *Jaxon* felt.

“Oh my God.”

Apparently, Macy has finally snapped out of whatever weird Jaxon-induced coma she's been in for the last five minutes. I shoot her a look. “Don't start.”

“Oh. My. God. OmigodOmigodOmigod. What just happened?”

“I fell out of a tree. Flint saved me from dying. Jaxon carried me back to the dorm because I sprained my ankle.” I say it all very flippantly, hoping if I keep it casual, if I don't let Macy know how messed up my own head is, she'll let things drop.

“Those are just the details.” She flops down on my bed, careful not to jostle my ankle as she does.

“I'm pretty sure the details are what's important here.”

“Not right now they aren't! Right now, it's all about the big picture.”

“And what exactly is the big picture?” I ask.

“That the two most popular boys in school are obsessed with you.”

I nearly strangle myself on my sweatshirt as I try to get a look at her face to see if she's kidding or not. "I wouldn't say they're obsessed," I finally manage to get out once I untie my hoodie strings and stop strangling myself in the process. "And aren't you the one who was just warning me to stay as far away from Jaxon as I could get?"

"Yeah, but that was before."

"Before what?" I demand.

"Before I saw how he looks at you." She closes her eyes and makes a sound very close to the one she made when Jaxon smiled at her. "I wish Cam would look at me like that."

"You want your boyfriend to look at you like he's an arrogant prick used to getting his own way?"

"Yeah, he pretty much does that already," she says with a roll of her eyes. "I want him to look at me like it physically *hurts* him not to be touching me."

"Jaxon doesn't look at me like that." I'm beginning to think it's how I look at him, though.

Macy snorts. "Baby, if that boy wanted you any more, he would spontaneously combust."

Her words warm me, make me feel like *I* might spontaneously combust—especially if I spend much longer thinking about Jaxon. That guy is way too hot for his own good...or my own peace of mind. And if Macy's right, if he's thinking even a quarter of the things I'm thinking about him...

"Is it hot in here?" I start to shrug out of the million and three layers of clothing I'm currently wearing.

"After three days of watching you be miserable in the cold, I never thought I'd hear you say that," Macy teases as she grabs hold of my snow pants and starts tugging at them hard enough to pull me halfway down the bed. "Guess all it takes to warm you is getting up close and personal with the most dangerous

boy at Katmere Academy.”

I slap at her hands. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to help you. These things are hard to get out of if you can’t stand.” She yanks and tugs some more and still doesn’t get much accomplished.

“It’s okay; I can do it.” I bat her hands away and stand up so that my weight is balanced on my unhurt leg as I slide off both the snow and fleece pants I’m wearing. Which leaves me in long underwear and wool socks, both of which are a million times more comfortable than the outerwear I’d been sweating in.

Macy strips off her own layers and doesn’t say anything else until we’re both settled back on my bed again. Then she looks me straight in the eye and says, “You’ve procrastinated long enough. Now spill.”

“There’s nothing to spill.” I slip under the covers and lean my back up against the wall. “You’re the one who said the different cliques never mix.”

“Yeah, well, you don’t have a *clique* yet, so apparently the rules don’t apply to you. And as for having nothing to spill, I call bullshit on that. You’ve been here exactly seventy-two hours—and I’ve been with you most of those hours, by the way. Not all of them, obviously, because I had no idea the two hottest boys in school were going to have a massive pissing contest over you in front of half the senior class.” She gives me an incredulous look. “When did this happen? *How* did this happen?”

“Nothing’s happened, I swear. Flint and I are just friends—”

“Yeah, right.”

“I’m serious. He’s really nice, but he’s never done anything even remotely un-friend-like.”

Macy rolls her eyes. “You mean like carrying you up the staircase or going out of his way to invite you to a snowball fight?”

“You asked him to carry me up the stairs. Altitude sickness, remember?”

“Yeah, and did I also ask him to dive out of a tree to save your life?”

“I’m sure he thought you would have asked if there was time.”

“Oh my God! You are so annoying.” She flops back against the bed. “I can’t decide if you’re lying to yourself or if you’re just this naive.”

“I’m not lying. And I’m not naive.” I give her my most sincere look. “I swear, Macy. There’s nothing going on between Flint and me.”

She studies me for a second, then nods. “Okay, fine. But I notice you didn’t say the same thing about you and Jaxon.”

“Jaxon and me... Jaxon is... I mean, we’re... I don’t...” I trail off, cheeks burning, because even I can tell how incoherent and ridiculous I sound. “Ugh.”

“Wow.” Now Macy’s eyes are huge. “That serious, huh?”

I don’t know what to say, so I almost don’t say anything at all. Except Macy has gone to school here a lot longer than I have, which means she knows a lot more about Jaxon than I do, and I would really like to benefit from a little of that knowledge.

“It’s complicated.” I expect her to ask what’s complicated about it, but she doesn’t. Instead she just nods like, *of course it is*. “He’s not really dangerous like you said, is he?”

Even as I ask the question, I know the answer...which is, *hell yeah, he is. And you should stay as far away from him as you possibly can.*

I mean, he’s never been anything but gentle when he touched me, but it’s as plain as the scar on his face that Jaxon isn’t like the other boys I’ve known. Every single thing about him screams *danger*—of the dark and brutally wounded variety. It’s in his eyes, in his voice, in the way he holds himself and the way he moves.

I recognize it, even acknowledge it. But when I'm near him, that doesn't matter. When I'm near him, *nothing* matters but getting closer, even though it's obvious he's been hurt before and just as obvious that he's determined to protect himself. Was it his brother's death that did this to him? Or is Hudson just one piece of a much bigger puzzle?

My instincts say it's the latter, but I haven't known him long enough to be sure.

Silence stretches between us for several long seconds. I watch Macy, who pretty much has the opposite of a poker face, as she tries to figure out what to say. It takes a little while, but finally she settles on, "He's not *Silence of the Lambs* dangerous. He's not going to drop you in a pit and starve you so he can make a dress out of your skin or anything."

I burst into incredulous laughter. "Seriously? That's the best you've got? He's not going to make a dress out of my skin?"

She shrugs. "I also said he wouldn't starve you in a pit."

"It's Alaska. You'd need a professional oil drill to make a pit in the frozen ground."

"Exactly." She holds her hands out in an obvious gesture. "See, told you he wouldn't do it."

"Are you trying to be reassuring here, or are you trying to scare the hell out of me?"

"Yes." She bats her eyes at me. "Is it working?"

"I have no freaking idea."

My phone buzzes, and I almost ignore it. But it has to be Heather—Macy's the only one at Katmere who's got my number—and right now, I could use a little of my best friend's brand of sanity.

Heather: How was your first day of classes?

Heather: Any hot guys in your English class?

Heather: Or hot girls? Asking for a friend...

She includes the dtf emoji in the last one, and I laugh despite

myself. Then take a quick pic of Macy in her tank top and long underwear, who fakes a pouty pose when I say it's my best friend back home, and answer:

Me: ALL the hot girls.

Heather: Ugh. Mean

Heather: How was class?

Me: Altitude sickness kept me home. But I'm going tomorrow
And then, because Heather can go on forever and I want to finish this conversation about how Jaxon isn't an actual movie serial killer, I text:

Me: Busy right now

Me: ttys

Then I put my phone aside and turn back to my cousin, who is currently scrolling through her own phone. She quits as soon as she realizes I'm done texting and then says, "Tell me the truth, Grace. Do you like Jaxon?"

"Like" is too insipid a word for the emotions Jaxon stirs up in me. There's something about him that calls to me on a soul-deep level, something broken in him that somehow fits with what's broken in me.

I know Macy doesn't see it. She's too busy being afraid of his darkness and social status to pay attention to what's under the surface. But I see it—all the grief and pain and fear roiling around in him just beneath the blank face and empty eyes. I see *him* in a way I don't think anyone else at this school does.

I don't tell her any of that, though—it's not my place to share Jaxon's suffering. Instead, I answer, "What does it matter if I like him or not?"

"That's not an answer."

"Because I don't have an answer!" I groan. "I've been here three days, Mace. Three days! Everything feels upside down and backward, and I have no idea what I think about anything...or

anyone. I mean, how am I supposed to know how I feel about a guy I barely know? Especially when he ignores me one minute and carries me home the next. He's different than anybody I've ever met and—"

Macy's snort interrupts my diatribe.

"What?" I beg. "Why do I get the feeling you know something you're not sharing?"

"I have no idea. Go ahead."

I narrow my eyes at her. "It sounds like you know something."

"Sorry." She holds her hands up in very obvious surrender. "I just...agree. Jaxon is definitely not like anyone you've ever met before."

"You say that like it's such a bad thing. I get that you don't want me to like him—"

"Hey, I told you to stay away from him because he's not an easy guy to be around. Or at least, he never was before. But with you..."

"What?"

"I don't know." She shrugs. "It sounds like every cliché in the book, but he's different when he's with you. He's somehow less intense but also *more* intense, if that makes sense."

"It doesn't. At all."

Macy huffs out a laugh. "I know. But you're the one who asked. I guess what I'm saying is that I'm wary about you and Jaxon doing whatever it is you're doing, but I'm not totally against it. Not like I would have been if I hadn't seen him with you today."

I want to push her on that, want to ask her exactly what she means. But there's a part of me that's sure I already have a pretty good idea. She's talking about the Jaxon I saw in the hall that first day, after Flint carried me up the stairs. Or the Jaxon I saw at the party, the one who looked so cold, so grim, that it sent me running in the opposite direction. Literally. If that's

the only Jaxon she's ever seen, no wonder she felt the need to warn me off him.

"I still don't know what we're doing," I admit, slumping into my pillows. "Or even if we're doing anything. I just wish I knew what he thought about me, you know? Like, is he playing with me, or is he having some of the same thoughts I'm having?"

"What thoughts are you having?" She asks it so casually that I answer without thinking.

"I feel like I am obsessed with him. I think about him all the—" I break off when I realize what I'm saying. "You tricked me."

Her look is all mock innocence. "I just asked you a question. You didn't have to answer it."

"You knew I was preoccupied and wasn't thinking about guarding my words."

"Good. I'm glad you weren't censoring what you say. You don't have to do that with me." She reaches out and grabs my hand. "Seriously, Grace. Things are going to be weird here for you for a while. But *we're* not going to be weird." She gestures between the two of us. "Even if you can't trust anybody else, you can trust me to have your back—even with Jaxon. We're family."

Suddenly, there's a lump the size of Denali in my throat, and I swallow a couple of times, trying to clear it. I didn't know how badly I needed to hear those words until she said them, didn't realize how much I was missing having someone I can just count on—no questions asked—to be in my corner.

"You know that goes both ways, right, Macy? You can trust me, too."

She grins. "I already do. I just want to make sure you remember what I said. And that I'm here, no matter what, on your side."

There's something intense in the way she says it—and the

way she looks at me afterward. Like she's trying to warn me and reassure me at the same time. It's so bizarre that a frisson of unease runs down my spine, taking away the toasty warmth that comes with lying under my blanket and replacing it with a chill that has nothing to do with Alaska and everything to do with the feeling that I'm in way over my head here, even if I don't know it yet.

I try to ignore the feeling, tell myself I'm probably just being paranoid. I'm smart—and honest—enough to acknowledge that lately I tend to expect the worst in every situation.

But instead of dwelling on the discomfort, I just nod and say, "Good. I'm glad."

Macy grins. "Now that we've got that out of the way, there is something I want to talk to you about." She gets up, crosses to her mini fridge. "But I'm pretty sure you're not going to like it."

23

Never Bring an Ice Cream Scoop to a Gun Fight

I eye Macy warily as she opens up the fridge and rummages around. “Exactly how much am I not going to like it?”

She holds up a pint of Cherry Garcia with a triumphant sound.

My stomach drops. “It’s so bad that we need Ben and Jerry’s?”

“To be honest, I always need Ben and Jerry’s.” She pulls the top off the brightly colored container, then grabs two spoons out of the bright-purple utensil cup on top of the fridge. “This just seems like a good time to indulge.”

I take the spoon she holds out to me. “I didn’t even know they sold Ben and Jerry’s up here.”

“It’s ten bucks a pint at the closest store, but they sell it.” She smiles at my look of horror.

“Wow. That’s...”

She grins. “Welcome to Alaska.”

“Guess what you have to talk about really is serious if it needs ten-dollar ice cream.”

She doesn’t say anything to my blatant fishing attempt, just holds out the open container so I can take a spoon of it. Which I do. She does, as well, and we do an ice-cream toast—mostly

because toasting with the first bite of ice cream is a ritual we created the summer we spent together when we were five—before taking a bite.

I wait for Macy to tell me whatever's on her mind, but she just scoops up another spoonful of ice cream. Then a third and a fourth, until I give up and do the same.

We're about halfway done with the container before she finally says, "I need to warn you about something."

Okaaaaaay? "Haven't you already warned me about Jaxon? I thought that's what we just did."

"This isn't about him. Or, I mean, I guess it is, but not like you're thinking." I must look as confused as I feel, because she takes a deep breath and blurts out, "If you like Jaxon—and I'm cool with it if you do, honest. But if you like him, Grace, you can't keep hanging out with Flint, too. It won't work."

That's so far from where I expected her to go that it takes me a second to actually assimilate her words. And even after I decide I understand them, they still don't make any sense. "What do you mean, it won't *work*? I'm not actually dating either one of them right now, and even if I was...surely I can be friends with the other one?"

"No." She shakes her head emphatically. "You can't. That's what I'm trying to tell you."

I'm half convinced she's messing with me—because how could she not be?—but she looks so serious, I have to ask, "What do you mean I *can't*? What is this? *The Breakfast Club*?"

"Worse. Way worse."

"Obviously, because even in *The Breakfast Club*, they figured out it didn't matter what group you belong to."

"Isn't *The Breakfast Club* also the movie where Judd Nelson sexually harasses Molly Ringwald by reaching up her skirt when he's hiding under her desk?"

When she puts it that way... “Okay, so maybe it’s not the best example.”

She rolls her eyes. “You think?”

“Even so, this whole *Jaxon and Flint can’t be civil to each other because they head up different groups* argument you’re making is ridiculous. Do you know how many people have been nice to me since I got here?” I hold up four fingers and tick off the names as I say them. “You, Jaxon, Flint, and Lia. That’s it. Four people. Which is why telling me that I can’t talk to one of the four people in this entire place who doesn’t treat me like I have the plague is total bullshit.”

“Oh, Grace.” She looks heartbroken. “Has it really been that bad?”

“Well, it hasn’t exactly been a picnic—even without the near-death experiences.” Still, she looks so distraught at my words that I can’t help but walk them back a little. “Don’t worry about it, Mace. I haven’t even started classes yet. I’m sure people will loosen up and stop staring once they have a chance to get to know me.”

She jumps on the walk-back. “They will, Grace. I swear. They just need to spend some time with you. We don’t get a lot of new people here, and most of us have been together a long time, even before Katmere.”

“I didn’t realize that.”

“Yeah. There’s another school that most of us went to before this one, starting in fifth grade. So if we seem aloof, that’s part of it, you know?”

“Yeah, but shouldn’t knowing one another that long make it easier for all of you to get along and not harder?”

“It should. And for a while, even, it did. I don’t know how to explain why things went bad, except to say that some awful stuff happened about a year ago and things got completely out

of hand. I mean, on the surface it looks like everything's fine, but once you dig a little, the damage is all right there. And part of what happened makes it nearly impossible for Jaxon and Flint to be on the same side of...anything."

It's pretty much the vaguest explanation anyone has ever given me about anything. And still it has me thinking, trying to piece together the very few things I've learned since I've been here. "Is this about what happened to Hudson Vega?"

The question is out before I can think twice about it, and judging from the look on Macy's face, I definitely should have thought twice. "What do you know about Hudson?" she whispers so quietly that it feels like she's scared to say his name out loud.

"Lia told me that her boyfriend died, remember? But then Jaxon mentioned his brother, and I put two and two together after I saw them arguing."

"Did Jaxon tell you Hudson was dead?" I don't think she would look this shocked if I told her I was flying back to San Diego under my own power, and suddenly all kinds of doubts assail me.

"Isn't he?" If Jaxon was lying to me about something like that, I don't know what I'll do. I mean, what kind of person—?

"He is. Yes. It's just that he doesn't talk about it much. The whole thing almost destroyed him, and I just couldn't imagine him discussing it with..." She trails off.

"A total stranger?"

"Yeah." She looks a little guilty to be admitting it. "Not that you guys are strangers, I guess—"

"Sometimes it's easier," I interrupt. "Talking to your best friend about the worst thing that ever happened to you is excruciating. Talking to a stranger who doesn't have any kind of vested interest...sometimes it doesn't hurt so much." It sounds weird, but it's true. Just one of the things I've learned in the last

month.

“That makes a strange kind of sense.” She puts the ice cream down and leans over to hug me.

I hug her back for a few seconds—until I feel the tears that are never far from the surface start to well up in my eyes. Then I pull back and give her a grin that says I’m totally fine, even if I’m not. “Maybe that’s why it seems like Jaxon is different with me. Because he knows I’ve lost someone, too.”

“Maybe.” She looks doubtful. “But if the attraction between you and Jaxon is because you’ve both lost someone... Just be careful, okay, Grace? The last thing you want is to become the chew toy in a game of tug-of-war between him and Flint. Because in the end, you’re going to be the one who gets ripped apart.”

I try to ignore her words—and do a pretty good job of it for the rest of the night. But once I’m in bed, with the lights out, I can’t help but think about what Macy said...and how it feels more like a premonition than a warning.

A heaviness creeps into my bones at the thought, pushing me into the bed, weighing me down until the simple act of rolling over and curling into a protective ball feels impossible. I settle for wrapping my arms around my waist and telling myself that she’s wrong. Even as a little voice inside me warns that she’s not.

Waffles Are the Way to a Girl's Everything

I wake up slowly to the sound of a text coming in. I groan as I think about ignoring it, about staying wrapped up in my covers where it's warm and comfortable and *perfect*. But I've been slow in responding to Heather's texts since I got to Alaska, and that's not cool.

Except when I roll over and grab my phone, I realize two things. One, it's after ten in the morning, which means I slept right through first period. And two, the text isn't from Heather.

And it's not from Macy, either. Instead, it's from a number I don't recognize.

Unknown: How is your ankle?

Flint? I wonder as I brush my hair out of my eyes and sit up.
Or someone else?

For a moment, Jaxon's eyes—deep, dark, fathomless—come to mind, but I can't believe it's him. Not when he's been so hot and cold the entire time we've known each other. And definitely not when he told me last night that we were going to do things the hard way—whatever that means.

Deciding to play it safe, I text back:

Me: Who is this?

There's a long pause. Then:

Unknown: Jaxon

It's only one word, and yet it somehow all but crackles with indignation. Like he can't imagine that I don't already have his number in my phone, just waiting for him to finally get around to texting me. I should be annoyed at the assumption, but I'm amused instead. So amused that I can't help answering:

Me: Jaxon who?

Jaxon: I don't know the punch line

Me: To what?

Jaxon: Whatever knock-knock joke you're setting up

I burst out laughing, because he's funny over text in a way he hasn't shown me in person.

Me: I'm terrible at knock-knock jokes

Jaxon: Finally some good news

Me: Hey!

Me: How many tickles does it take to make an octopus laugh?

There's a long pause, where I can totally imagine his face. Then:

Jaxon: I didn't realize octopi laughed

Yeah, that's pretty much the response I expected. I send an eye roll emoji, then:

Me: Come on. Play along.

Jaxon: I just wanted to know how your ankle was

Me: Take a guess and I'll tell you

Another long pause.

Jaxon: 17

Me: 17?!?!?!?!?!?

Jaxon: Well, it's obviously not 8 or it wouldn't be a joke

Jaxon: And I don't have a clue otherwise, so why not 17?

I send him two more eye roll emojis.

Me: Let's try this again

Me: How many tickles does it take to make an octopus laugh?

This pause is so long that I've just about convinced myself that I've blown it and he isn't going to answer. But then:

Jaxon: How many?

I nearly drop my phone in excitement, and I'm grinning so hard that my cheeks hurt. Which is ridiculous, but I'm learning that when it comes to this boy, *I'm* ridiculous.

Me: Ten-tickles

Jaxon: That's...actually pretty good

Me: Wow. High praise

Jaxon: Don't let it go to your head

Me: Believe me, I won't

I end the text with three eye roll emojis, because he deserves it.

Jaxon: What do you get when you cross a vampire and a snowman?

What? A joke? From the perennially serious Jaxon Vega? I can't answer back fast enough.

Me: I have no idea.

Jaxon: Frostbite

I laugh out loud, because who is this Jaxon? And how do I keep him around?

Me: Halloween and Alaska all rolled into one, huh?

Me: Color me impressed

There's another long pause, but this time something tells me not to give up on Jaxon quite yet. That he isn't not texting because he's put down his phone but because he's trying to figure out what to say next. Which...can you say mind-boggling? I can barely imagine a Jaxon who doesn't know exactly what to do and say in any situation.

Finally my phone dings again.

Jaxon: You promised to tell me about your ankle

It's not a great segue from the fun conversation we were just having, but I go with it, because the alternative is not answering, and I don't want to do that. At least not yet.

Me: I don't know. I'm just waking up. My uncle must have decided I don't have to go to class again today.

Jaxon: I'd say lucky you, but...

Me: What, falling out of a tree not lucky enough for you?

Jaxon: Do you KNOW what lucky means?

The laugh hits me so unexpectedly that I nearly snort. Then slap a hand over my mouth in horrified amusement, even though there's no one around to hear.

Me: I walked away, didn't I?

Jaxon totally mimics me by sending an eye roll emoji.

Jaxon: Pretty sure I carried you away

Me: Oh. Right. Thanks again for that.

Jaxon's response is just a string of eye roll emojis.

Now that he's got me thinking about it, I'm curious how my ankle is, too. So I throw back the covers and try to climb out of bed—only to whimper the second I put any weight on my right foot. Well, that answers that. With the added problem that I really have to pee.

Jaxon: What are you going to do today?

Me: I think I'll lie in bed and feel sorry for myself

Jaxon: Good times

Me: Yeah, well, turns out the ankle hurts a little bit

Jaxon: You ok?

Me: Of course

Me: brb

I use the promise of Advil to propel myself across the room to the bathroom. When I'm done, I wash my hands and grab two of the little round pills and a bottle of water before hobbling

back to my bed. I force myself to take the pills before I pick my phone back up again, but it's hard. I'm dying to know if Jaxon texted me back.

He didn't. Which is cool, I tell myself. I mean. I'm the one who cut our conversation off so abruptly.

Me: I'm back

No answer.

Me: Sorry that took so long.

Still no answer.

Ugh. I blew it.

I'm pissed at myself for stopping our conversation. And just as angry for being pissed off. Jaxon showed me more of himself in the last fifteen minutes than he has since I got here. What do I have to be annoyed about that he stopped texting?

Absolutely nothing. I mean, the boy does have to go to class, after all.

Somehow, telling myself that only makes everything worse. Well, that and the fact that I'm starving, and the peanut butter is all the way across the room. Of course.

I lie back against my pillows and fire off a couple of messages to Heather. Then I check Snapchat and Instagram and even play a couple of rounds of *Pac-Man*—all while telling myself that I'm absolutely, positively not waiting for Jaxon to text again.

But eventually my stomach starts growling, and I toss my phone aside. A girl can't live on peanut butter alone, even if right now I'm hungry enough to give it a try.

I start to hobble toward the fridge but get distracted halfway there by a knock on my door. For a second, just a second, I wonder if it might be Jaxon. Then common sense kicks in. It's probably Uncle Finn coming to check on me and my bum ankle.

Except when I answer the door, it's not Uncle Finn. And it's not Jaxon, either. Instead, it's a woman carrying a heavily

loaded food tray.

“Grace?” she asks as I step aside to let her in.

“Yes.” I smile at her. “Thank you so much. I’m *starving*.”

“Anytime.” She grins back. “Where do you want me to put it?”

“I can take it.” I reach for the tray, but she shoots me a look that says to give her a break. “Um, the bed is fine, I guess.” I gesture toward my side of the room.

She crosses to my bed and puts the tray down toward the foot of it. Then asks, “Is there anything else I can get you?”

I have no idea, considering the food is under two of those silver dome things to keep it warm. But since I’m hungry enough to eat almost anything—and I’m not in the habit of having anyone wait on me—I answer, “No, this is perfect. Thank you.”

Trust Macy to think of me even when she’s in class. My cousin is a goddess.

Except, as I settle back onto the bed, I realize there’s a small black envelope on the tray. One that has my name written on the front in a masculine scrawl that definitely isn’t Macy’s.

Uncle Finn, I tell myself, even as my heart beats triple time.

Because it can’t be Jaxon, I figure as I reach for the envelope with trembling fingers.

Can’t be Jaxon, I think again as I slide out the simple black card.

Definitely can’t be Jaxon, I tell myself one more time as I open up the card and search for a signature.

Except...except it *is* from Jaxon, and my heart is actually threatening to burst out of my chest.

*I don't know what you like yet, but
I figured you were hungry. Stay off that
ankle.*

Jaxon

Oh my God.

OmigodOmigodOmigod.

Oh. My. God.

I mean, it's not the *most* romantic note in the world, but that doesn't even matter. Because Jaxon sent me breakfast. *That's* why he didn't text me back. He was busy doing this.

I grab my phone and fire off a quick text to him.

Me: Thank you!!!!!!!!!!!!!! You really are a lifesaver

He doesn't answer right away, so I start poking around the tray, seeing what he had the cafeteria bring me. The answer is *everything*.

There's a cup of coffee and another one of tea. A bottle of sparkling water and a glass of orange juice. There's even an ice pack for my ankle.

I lift up the domes to find one plate loaded with eggs and sausage and a giant cinnamon roll that smells amazing. The other has a Belgian waffle on it, topped with strawberry compote and what looks to be freshly whipped cream...in the middle of Alaska. In *November*.

I'm so touched, I think I might cry. Or I would if I wasn't so hungry.

Still, there's no way I can eat all this, and I should feel bad about wasting the food. But right now, I'm too busy smiling to worry about anything else.

My stomach growls again, louder this time, and I dig in, starting with the waffle. Because whipped cream plus syrup plus strawberries equals nirvana.

I'm halfway through the whipped cream covered deliciousness when my phone finally dings again—and I nearly upend the whole tray trying to get to it.

Jaxon: Sorry, taking a test

Jaxon: Waffles or eggs?

Me: Waffles all the way

Jaxon: I figured

Jaxon: Use the ice pack

Me: Wow. Bossy much?

Me: I am using it. I can take care of myself, you know

Jaxon: Now who's being bossy?

I'm not sure if I should be offended or not by that latest crack. I probably should be, but a waffle this good gives the guy a little extra leeway. Plus, I maybe, possibly deserved it.

Me: How about you? Waffles or eggs?

Jaxon: Neither

Me: So what do you like to eat?

As soon as I hit Send, I realize what a bad idea that last text was and start freaking out. Because oh my God, that sounded way more suggestive than I meant it to be. Damn it. He's either going to think I'm a freak or he's going to respond with something really gross, and I don't want either of those things to happen.

It's been a long time since I've texted/flirted with a boy, and I'm not ready for it to end.

I'm certainly not ready to stop talking to Jaxon, who's witty and sexy and makes me feel things no one else ever has. Plus, it's so much easier to talk to him like this than in person, when he's all dark and broody.

Several seconds pass without a response, and I contemplate throwing my phone across the room or drowning myself in the leftover maple syrup.

In the end, I do neither. I just wait impatiently for him to answer. And when he finally does, I hold my breath as I swipe open my screen. Then burst out laughing because:

Jaxon: I don't think we're there yet, but I'm sure you'll let me know when we are

Way. Right. Answer.

Truly,
Madly,
Deeply Bitten

I spend the rest of the morning lying around, waiting for Jaxon to text whenever he can. Which is so not a badass feminist move, but I've given up controlling my brain when it comes to this boy. Plus, it's not like there's anything else to do. I've read everything on my Kindle, and I can't watch any more episodes of *Legacies* without Macy. Add in my bum ankle and the fact that I can't go anywhere and that leaves...

Jaxon: What's your favorite movie?

Me: *Atm?* To All The Boys I've Loved Before

Me: Of all time? Some Kind of Wonderful

Me: Yours

Jaxon: *Die Hard*

Me: Seriously?

Jaxon: What's wrong with *Die Hard*?

Me: Nothing

Jaxon: *Jk.* It's *Rogue One*

Me: The Star Wars movie where everybody dies????

Jaxon: The Star Wars movie where people sacrifice themselves to save their galaxy

Jaxon: There are worse ways to die

It's not the answer I'm expecting, but now that he's said it, I can totally see how that movie would appeal to this guy who has gone out of his way to rescue me over and over again. Even *Die Hard* makes sense when I put it in that light. A main character who's willing to die if it means keeping other people safe.

There's a lot more to Jaxon than the person I met at the bottom of the stairs my first day here. I mean, he's still the jerk who told me not to let the door hit me on my way out. That's not something I'm likely to forget any time soon. But he's also the guy who saved me from Marc and Quinn. *And* the guy who carried me all the way back to my dorm room last night. That has to count for something, right?

Plus, I can't believe how different he is when there's no one else around. When it's just the two of us texting and he's not so busy trying to convince me that he wants nothing to do with me... and, more, that I should want nothing to do with him.

I wish I could ask the real Jaxon Vega to please stand up, but the truth is, I'm kind of hoping he's the guy who's been texting me for the last two hours. And if he's not...well, I guess I don't want to know that yet.

Me: Favorite ice cream flavor?

Jaxon: Don't have one

Me: Because you like them all???

Me: Which, btw, is the only acceptable answer to not having a favorite

Jaxon: I think we both know there are a million different reasons I'm unacceptable and ice cream choice barely makes the list

That line shouldn't make me swoon. *It shouldn't*, especially when it's so obviously a warning. But how can it not when it's delivered by the same boy who said *Rogue One* is his favorite movie?

It's pretty obvious Jaxon is the villain of his own story. I just wish I knew why.

Jaxon: Favorite song?

Me: OMG, I can't choose

Jaxon: What if I said you had to?

Me: I can't. There are too many

Me: You?

Jaxon: I asked you first

Me: Ugh. You suck

Jaxon: You have no idea how much

Me: Okay, fine

Me: Atm, Niall Horan's Put a Little Love on Me and anything by Maggie Rogers

Me: Of all time? Take Me to Church by Hozier or Umbrella from Rihanna

Me: You?

Jaxon: Savage Garden Truly, Madly, Deeply

Jaxon: Anything by Childish Gambino or Beethoven

Jaxon: Van Morrison's "Brown-Eyed Girl" is my new favorite, though

I drop my phone because...what do I say to that? How am I not supposed to swoon over this boy? Like, seriously? *How am I not supposed to swoon?* It's impossible.

I pick my phone back up with shaking hands. He hasn't texted anything else, but to be honest, I don't expect him to for a while. That was...a lot.

Instead, I swipe open my Spotify app. And play "Brown-Eyed Girl"...on repeat.

I'm still listening to it when Macy stops by around noon to check on me. "What are you listening to?" she queries, nose wrinkled.

"It's a long story."

She eyes me speculatively. “I bet. You should tell me all about—” She breaks off when she sees the remains of my very big breakfast. “Where did you get the waffle?” she demands, crossing the room so she can scoop a little of the leftover whipped cream out of its bowl and suck it off her finger. “It’s not Thursday.”

I stare at her, baffled. “I don’t even know what that means.”

“It means the cafeteria only makes waffles on Thursdays. And we only get whipped cream on special occasions.” She dives back into the whipped-cream bowl, holds up a finger covered in the sweet, fluffy stuff. “Today is *not* a special occasion.”

“Apparently, it is,” I answer with a shrug, and I try to ignore the way her words warm me up all over. “At least for me.”

Not going to lie, it *feels* like a special occasion. How can it not when I have texts on my phone from Jaxon right now telling me this is his favorite song?

“I can’t believe my dad had them make you—” My face must give it away, because she breaks off mid-sentence. “This breakfast didn’t come from my dad, did it?”

I don’t know how to answer that. I mean, if I try to pretend it’s from Uncle Finn, she’ll just ask him about it and find out the truth. If I tell her it’s from someone else, she’s going to want to know who sent it, and I’m not sure I’m ready to tell her. I kind of like the idea of this Jaxon—the one who tells me vampire jokes and sends me waffles with fresh whipped cream—as my secret. At least for a little while.

But the look on Macy’s face says she’s not about to be put off. And that she’s got a pretty good idea of where the food came from, even though I haven’t answered her yet.

Which leaves me with only one option, really. A downplayed version of the truth. “It’s really no big deal, okay? My ankle’s bothering me, and he was trying to help.”

“Flint?” she asks, eyes wide. “Or Jaxon?” She says the last

in a whisper.

“Does it matter?” I ask.

“Oh my God! It was Jaxon! He talked Chef Janie into making you waffles. I didn’t even know that was possible—she’s really tough. Then again, if anyone could do it, Jaxon could. I mean, the boy is terrifyingly efficient. And he always gets what he wants.” She grins. “And I’m pretty sure what he wants right now is you.”

A knock sounds from behind her, and I’ve never been more relieved to have someone come to my door in my life. “Can you get that? My ankle still hurts.”

“Of course! I want first crack at interrogating Jaxon anyway.”

“It’s not going to be Jaxon,” I tell her, but just the idea that it could be has my palms sweating a little. I sit up straighter, try desperately to fix the mess that is currently my hair as Macy opens the door.

Looks like the panic was for nothing, though, because it isn’t Jaxon. It’s a woman, carrying a large yellow envelope.

I tell myself I’m not disappointed, even as the sudden butterflies in my stomach kind of fall back down with a *thud*. At least until the woman, who Macy calls Roni, hands her the package. “I’m supposed to deliver this to Grace.”

Macy whips her head around to look at me even as she takes the large envelope being thrust into her hands. Her eyes are huge, but I can’t blame her. I’m sure mine are just as big.

I don’t know what else Macy says to Roni to get her out of our room, because every ounce of my attention is focused on the envelope in her hands. And my name written on the front of it in the same bold scrawl that was on the earlier note.

“Give me!” I practically beg as I push myself to my feet. My ankle still hurts, but for this, I’m willing to suffer.

Except Macy is in full mother-hen mode, apparently. “Sit back down!” she squawks as she shoos me back to bed.

“Give me the envelope!” I make grabby hands at it.

“I’ll give it to you as soon as you’re back in bed with your ankle on that pillow.”

And then she glares at me, standing just out of reach, until I do what she says.

But the second I’m settled, the stern look goes away and the stars come back to her eyes. She thrusts the envelope at me and practically yells, “Open it, open it, open it!”

“That’s what I’m doing!” I tell her as I tear at the seal. It’s one of those plastic Bubble Wrap ones, so it’s harder than it should be, but eventually I get it open.

And out falls a large black library book.

“What is it?” Macy climbs on the bed next to me in an effort to get a better look.

“I don’t know,” I answer. But then I turn it over and...it’s totally the last book I ever would have expected him to send.

“*Twilight*? He sent me a copy of *Twilight*?” I turn to Macy in confusion.

Macy gasps as she stares from the book to me. And then she starts to laugh. And laugh. And laugh.

And I guess it’s kind of funny...the idea that a guy like Jaxon would send a girl a paranormal romance, but I don’t think it’s nearly as amusing as Macy is making it out to be. Plus, I’ve always kind of wanted to read it, to see what all the fuss was about all those years ago.

“I like it,” I tell her a little defiantly. Because I do—almost as much as I like the fact that Jaxon took the time to pick it out for me.

“I do, too,” Macy says around another fit of giggles. “I swear. It’s super...charming, actually.”

“I agree.” I open the front cover, and my heart stutters as I see the small Post-it note stuck to the cover page. In the scrawl

I'm rapidly coming to recognize as Jaxon's is this quote from the novel: *"I said it would be better if we weren't friends, not that I didn't want to be."*

"Oooooooh!" Macy clutches her hands to her chest and pretends to swoon. "If you don't kiss that boy soon, I'm going to disown you. Or I'm going to kiss him myself."

"I'm sure Cam would appreciate that." I trace my finger over the individual letters of every word he wrote, one after the other, even knowing it makes me look as starry-eyed as I feel.

"Hey, Cam's always talking about doing things for the greater good. Here's his chance to put his money where his mouth is."

"You kissing Jaxon is for the greater good?" I open the book to the first page.

"Me kissing Jaxon as your proxy is definitely for the greater good. Put you both out of your misery." She bats her eyelashes. "Though it definitely wouldn't be a sacrifice."

"How about we make a pact? You keep your lips off Jaxon and I'll keep mine off Cam?"

"Wooo!" Macy shouts so loud, it makes me jump. "I knew last night you were into him, with your babbling and your I-we-he stuff."

"I didn't say I was into him." But it's kind of hard not to fall for him at least a little after a morning like this one.

"You didn't say you weren't, either."

I roll my eyes. "Don't you have a class to go to?"

"Trying to get rid of me?" But she climbs off my bed, starts straightening her hair in the mirror over the dresser.

"I am, yes." I hold up the book. "I want to start reading."

"I bet you do." She makes kissy faces at me. "Oh, Edward, I love you so much! Whoops, I mean Jaxon."

I throw a pillow at her, but she just laughs and grabs her

backpack. Then she gives me a quick wave before heading out the door.

The second Macy's gone, I sink back onto the bed and hold *Twilight* to my chest. Jaxon sent me a love story. I mean, yeah, it's about a vampire, but it's still a love story. And that quote... I didn't want to show it in front of my cousin, but swooooooooooon.

I grab my phone and fire off a text to Jaxon.

I hesitate then send a swoon emoji

Jaxon: Don't get too starry-eyed

Jaxon: It's supposed to be a warning

But he punctuates his warning with a winky face/kiss emoji.

Me: Of what?

Jaxon: Things that go bump in the night

Jaxon: You never can be too careful

Me: I like scary stories

Jaxon: But do you like the monsters in them?

Me: I guess it depends on the monster

Jaxon: I guess we'll see, then, won't we?

Me: I don't know what that means

I start to text more—his mood is so different than it was earlier, and I want to get to the bottom of the change—but there's yet another knock on my door.

Me: Hey, did you send me something else?????????

Jaxon: Why don't you open the door and find out?

Me: That sounds like a yes

Me: You don't have to do this, you know

Me: I mean, I appreciate it so much

Me: But it's not necessary

Jaxon: Grace

Jaxon: Open the door

I start making my way across the room to the door, thrilled that since the Advil kicked in, walking doesn't hurt as much,

and my limp is a lot less pronounced. Then, right before I open the door, I text:

Me: How do you know I haven't already opened the door?

"Because I think I would have noticed," he answers from where he's standing on the other side of the beaded curtain.

"Jaxon!" I squeak out his name, my free hand going to my hair automatically in an effort to smooth down the mess. "You're here."

He lifts a brow. "You want me to go?"

"No, of course not! Come on in." I hold the door open as I step back.

"Thanks." He jerks a little as he steps over the threshold and Macy's beads brush against him.

"I don't know why Macy insists on keeping those up when they shock people on the regular," I say, swatting the annoying things out of the way so I can close the door. "Are you okay?"

"I have no idea." His eyes meet mine for the first time, and the happiness bubbling inside me dies down as I realize the blankness is back.

"Oh, well." I duck my head, suddenly way self-conscious around this guy who I've had no trouble talking to all day. "Thanks for the book."

He shakes his head, but at least he's smiling when he answers. "I thought it might give you something to do while you're resting your ankle." He looks at me pointedly.

"Hey, I was in bed. You're the one who knocked on my door."

His eyes widen a little at my mention of being in bed, and then we both do the only thing we can do in the situation—stare awkwardly at my rumpled hot-pink sheets and comforter.

"Do you, um—" I clear my suddenly clogged throat. "Do you want to sit down?"

He makes a face, then moves in a negative motion but

seconds later does the opposite and plops down at the end of my bed. All the way in the corner, like he's afraid I'm going to bite him—or jump him.

It's such an un-Jaxon-like move that for a second, I just kind of stare at him. And then decide, screw it. I'm not going to spend the next hour feeling awkward. I'm just not. So I flop down on the bed next to him and ask, "What did one bone say to the other bone?"

He eyes me warily, but his shoulders relax—and so does the rest of him. "I don't think I want to know."

I ignore him. "We have to stop meeting at this joint."

He groans. "That was..."

"Fabulous?" I tease.

He shakes his head. "Really, really awful." But he's smirking, and finally I can see something in the depths of his eyes—something real, instead of that terrible blankness.

Determined to keep it that way, I tell him, "It's kind of a specialty of mine."

"Bad jokes?"

"Terrible jokes. I inherited the talent from my mother."

He lifts a brow. "So terrible jokes run in the DNA?"

"Oh, it's totally a gene," I agree. "Right next to the ones for curly hair and long eyelashes." I bat my eyes at him to make a point, much the way Macy did to me a little while ago.

"Are you sure you didn't get it from both sides?" he asks, face totally innocent.

I narrow my eyes at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing." He holds his hands up in mock surrender. "Just that your jokes are *really* terrible."

"Hey! You said you liked my octopus joke."

"I didn't want to hurt your feelings." He reaches for my leg, drapes my foot and ankle over his lap. "It seemed rude to kick

you when you were down and out.”

“Hey! I may be down, but I’m not out.” I try to pull my foot back, but Jaxon holds me in place, his long, elegant fingers instinctively finding the spots that hurt the most and massaging them.

I moan a little because the massage feels *really* good. And so does having his hands on me. “How are you so good at that?” I ask when I can finally speak again.

He shrugs, shoots me a little smirk. “Maybe I inherited it.”

It’s the first time he’s mentioned any family except his one cryptic comment about his brother yesterday, and I jump on it. “Did you?”

He stops for a second—his hand, his breath, everything—and just looks at me with those eyes I try so hard to find emotion in. And then he says, “No.”

His fingers start back on their massage like they never even stopped.

It frustrates me, but not enough to push when he has No Trespassing signs posted all over himself in huge black letters. Which says a lot more about him than he could possibly imagine.

We spend the next couple of minutes in silence as he massages my foot until the ache is almost completely gone. Only then, when his fingers finally still for good, does he say, “My eyes.”

My gaze darts to his. “What do you mean?”

“That’s what I got from my mother. My eyes.”

“Oh.” I lean forward until I can once again see the silver flecks against the darkness of his irises. “They’re beautiful eyes.” Especially when he’s looking at me the way he is now—a little bemused, a little intrigued, a lot surprised. “Did you inherit anything else from your mother?” I ask softly.

“I hope not.” His words are low, unguarded, and it’s the first time he’s ever been so open with me.

I search for something to say that won't break the mood, but it's too late. The second he registers what he said, Jaxon's entire face closes up.

"I need to go," he tells me, setting my foot gently on the bed before getting to his feet.

"Please don't." It's barely more than a whisper, but the sentiment comes from deep inside me. I feel like I'm seeing the real Jaxon for the first time up close and personal, and I don't want to lose that.

He pauses, and for a moment, I think he might actually listen to me. But then he's reaching inside the pocket of his designer jacket and pulling out a rolled-up piece of paper that's been fastened with a black satin ribbon.

He holds it out to me.

I take it with hands that I have to will to stay steady. "You didn't have to—"

"It made me think of you." He reaches up, takes a gentle hold of one of my curls, as has become his habit. But this time, he doesn't stretch it out and let it boing back into place. Instead, he simply worries it between his fingers.

Our eyes meet, and suddenly the room feels about twenty degrees hotter. My breath catches in my throat, and I bite my lower lip in an effort to keep myself from saying—or doing—something we're not ready for.

Except Jaxon looks like he might be ready for all kinds of things, with his gaze fastened on my mouth and his body swaying toward me just a little.

And then he's reaching out, pressing his thumb against my lip until I get the hint and stop biting it.

"Jaxon." I reach for him, but he's already across the room, his hand on the doorknob.

"Rest that ankle," he tells me as he opens the door. "If it feels

better tomorrow, I'll take you to my favorite place.”

“Which is?”

He quirks a brow, tilts his head. And doesn't say another word as he slips into the hall and closes the door behind him.

I stare after him, the scrolled-up piece of paper he gave me still in my hand. And wonder how on earth I'm going to keep this beautiful, broken boy from cracking my already battered heart wide open.

26

The Uniform Doesn't Make the Woman, But it Sure Does Bring Out the Insecurities

Pants or skirt?

I stare at my closet and all the clothes neatly lined up in it, courtesy of my cousin. I know I should have done this last night, but after a giant plate of nachos followed by three episodes of *Legacies* and a marathon gossip session over my jam-packed day, I didn't have the energy to do much more than lie in bed and think about Jaxon.

I turn toward my desk—and the paper Jaxon brought me yesterday, which is lying directly under the copy of *Twilight* he sent me. Not because I don't like it but because I like it too much, and I don't want to share it with anyone. Not even Macy or Heather.

It's a page ripped straight out of a copy of Anaïs Nin's journals—I don't know which one, because the heading doesn't say. I almost googled it yesterday to find out, but there's something special about not knowing, something intimate about having only this one page of her diary to go by. To have only these words that Jaxon wanted me to see.

Deep down, I am not different from you. I dreamed you, I wished for your existence.

The page has a lot more than that simple phrase on it, but as I read and reread it about a hundred times yesterday, these are the words that jumped out at me over and over again. Partly because they were so swoon-worthy and partly because I'm starting to feel the same way about him. About Jaxon, whose deepest thoughts and heart and pain seem to so closely echo mine.

It's a lot to take in at any time, let alone on my first day, when my mouth is dry and my stomach is churning with nerves.

Which is why I'm currently standing here, in front of my closet with absolutely no idea of what to wear. Because I obviously worried about the wrong first-day stuff...

Do the girls usually wear their uniform pants or skirts here? Or doesn't it matter? I try to remember what Macy wore the last couple of days, but it's all a blank besides the tropical-print snow pants she wore for the snowball fight.

"Skirt," Macy says as she walks out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her head. "There are wool tights to go with it in the bottom drawer of your dresser."

I close my eyes in relief. Thank God for cousins.

"Awesome, thanks." I slip one of the black skirts off the hanger and step into it, then add a white blouse and black blazer before going over to my dresser for a pair of black tights.

"If you wear the blouse, you've also got to wear the tie," Macy tells me as she opens one of my dresser drawers and pulls out a black tie with purple and silver stripes on it.

"Seriously?" I demand, looking from her to the tie and back again.

"Seriously." She drapes it around my neck. "Do you know how to tie one?"

"Not a clue." I head back toward the closet. "Maybe I should go for one of the polo shirts."

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll show you. It’s a lot easier than it looks.”

“If you say so.”

She grins. “I do say so.”

She starts by draping the tie unevenly around my neck and wrapping the longer end over the shorter end. A couple more wraps and a tuck and pull through—all narrated by my cousin—and I’ve got a perfectly tied tie around my neck...even if it is a little tight.

“Looks good,” Macy says as she steps back to admire her handiwork. “I mean, the knot’s not as fancy as some of the guys wear, but it gets the job done.”

“Thanks. I’ll look up a couple of videos on YouTube this afternoon, make sure I know what I’m doing before I have to tie it again tomorrow.”

“It’s pretty easy. You’ll get the hang of it in no time. In fact—” She breaks off at the loud knock on our door.

“Are you expecting someone?” I ask as I move toward the door, motioning for her to move back toward the bathroom, as all she’s currently wearing is a towel.

“No. I usually meet my friends in the cafeteria.” Her eyes go wide. “Do you think it’s Jaxon?” She whispers his name like she’s afraid he’ll hear it through the door.

“I didn’t think so, no.” But now that she’s planted the idea in my head... Ugh. My already nervous stomach does a series of somersaults. “What do I do?” My own voice drops to a whisper without the conscious decision to do so on my part. He texted me last night before bed, but I haven’t seen him since he came to my room yesterday around lunch, and after lying awake half the night thinking about him, I’m feeling hell a awkward.

She looks at me like I’m missing the obvious. “Answer the door?”

“Right.” I smooth my sweaty palms down the sides of my skirt and reach for the door handle. I have no idea what to do, what to say...although judging by how tight this ridiculous tie suddenly feels, I may not be able to say anything at all before it actually strangles me.

I glance back at Macy, who shoots me an encouraging thumbs-up one last time, then take as deep a breath as I can manage before pulling open the door.

All my nerves dissipate in the space from one strangled breath to the next, largely because the person standing at our door is most definitely *not* Jaxon Vega.

“Hi, Uncle Finn! How are you?”

“Hi, Gracey girl.” He leans down and drops an absentminded kiss on the top of my head. “I just stopped by to check on your ankle and finally deliver your schedule.” He holds a blue sheet of paper out to me. “And to wish you luck on your first day of class. You’re going to do great!”

I’m not so sure about that, but I’m determined to think positive today, so I smile and say, “Thanks. I’m excited. And my ankle’s sore, but okay.”

“Good. I made sure you got into that art class you wanted and that you have our best history teacher, since that’s your favorite subject. But check over your schedule, make sure you’re not repeating any classes. I did my best, but mistakes happen.”

He tweaks my cheek like I’m a five-year-old. It’s such a Dad thing to do that my heart aches a little.

“I’m sure it’s perfect,” I tell him.

Macy snorts. “Don’t bet on it. If Dad did it himself instead of letting Mrs. Haversham do it, no telling what he’s got you signed up for.”

“Mrs. Haversham did it,” he tells her with a wink. “I just supervised. Brat.” He walks over and gives her a one-armed

shoulder hug and the same kiss on the top of her head that he gave me.

“Ready for that math test today?” he asks.

“Been ready for a week.” She rolls her eyes.

“Good. And how’s that English project going? Did you finish—?”

“This is a boarding school,” Macy interrupts, smacking lightly at his arm. “That means parents don’t get to give their kids the third degree over every assignment.”

“That’s because they don’t know about every assignment. I, however, do. Which means I get to check up on you whenever I want.”

“Lucky me,” she deadpans.

He just grins. “Exactly.”

“Are you going to get out of here so I can get dressed? Grace and I still need to hit the cafeteria before class. Breakfast *is* the most important meal of the day, after all.”

“Not if you waste it on cherry Pop-Tarts.”

“Cherry Pop-Tarts are their own food group.” She glances my way. “Back me up here, Grace.”

“Maybe two food groups, if you count the frosting,” I agree. “So are the brown sugar ones.”

“Exactly what I’m talking about!”

It’s Uncle Finn’s turn to roll his eyes. But he drops another kiss on her head before heading for the door. “Do your old man a favor and grab some fruit with those Pop-Tarts, will you?”

“Cherries are fruit,” I tease him.

“Not that way, they aren’t.” He gives me a comforting shoulder squeeze. “Don’t forget to stop by my office later. Now that you’re feeling better, I want to talk to you about a few things and hear how your first day went.”

“It’ll be fine, Uncle Finn.”

“I’m hoping it will be more than fine. But good or bad, come tell me about it. Okay?”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Good. See you later, girls.” He smiles at us, then disappears out the door.

Macy shakes her head as she grabs her own school uniform out of the closet. “Just ignore him. My dad’s a total dork.”

“Most good dads are dorks, aren’t they?” I ask as I move to the mirror on my closet door so I can start fixing my hair. “Besides, he reminds me of my dad. It’s kind of nice.”

She doesn’t say anything to that, and when I glance her way, it’s to find her staring sadly at me—which is, bar none, the second worst thing about losing my parents. I hate the sympathy, hate the way everyone feels sorry for me and no one knows what to say.

“That was supposed to be a happy comment,” I tell her. “You don’t need to feel bad.”

“I know. It’s just that I’m so happy you’re here and we have this time to get to know each other. And then it hits me all over again and I feel gross for being happy.” She sighs. “Which sounds like I’m making this all about me, but I’m not. I just—”

“Hey, you.” I break into what I’m learning could be a really, *really* long soliloquy. “I get it. And though how I got here sucks, I’m glad we have this time, too. Okay?”

A slow smile takes the place of her worried look. “Yeah, okay.”

“Good. Now get dressed. I’m starving.”

“On it!” she says, disappearing into the bathroom to do just that.

Twenty minutes later, we finally make it down the back stairs (“sooooo much less crowded,” Macy swears) to the cafeteria, after winding our way past *no less* than seven suits of armor, four giant fireplaces, and more columns than existed in all of

Ancient Greece.

Okay, the last might be a slight exaggeration, but only slight. Plus, the fact that they're black instead of white gets them extra points in my book. And that's not even counting the gold filigree around the tops and bottoms of the columns.

I mean, the whole thing is a total head trip. Seriously. Going to school in Alaska is wild enough. Going to school in an actual castle, complete with halls whose bloodred ceilings are lined with Gothic lancet arches, is hella cool.

At least if you don't count all the people staring at me as we make our way through the halls. Macy dismisses it as "new-girl stuff" and tells me to ignore it. But it's pretty hard to do that when people are honest-to-God turning around to stare at me when I pass. I know Macy said they've all been together for a long time, but come on. I can't actually be the first new person to land here, can I? Just the idea is absurd. Schools get new kids all the time—even schools in Alaska.

Macy interrupts my inner diatribe with an excited "We're here!" as we stop in front of three sets of black-and-gold doors. The wood is carved, and I try to get a closer look at the designs, but my cousin is in too big of a hurry to show me the cafeteria. Which...seen one, seen them all, I figure.

But as she throws open one of the doors with all the pomp and flair of a game-show hostess showing me the car behind curtain number one, it's pretty obvious that I'm wrong. Again. Because this cafeteria—and it feels wrong to even refer to the room by such a mundane name—is like nothing I've ever seen before. Ever.

I'm pretty sure it even puts the library to shame.

To begin with, the room is huge, with long walls covered in different murals of dragons and wolves and I don't know what else. Crown molding in black and gold runs around the edges of

the ceiling and down the walls, framing each mural like a regular painting. The artist in me is fascinated and wants to spend hours studying each one, but I've got class in half an hour, so it'll have to wait. Plus, there's so much else to see here that I don't know where to look first.

The ceiling is arched and an in-your-face, unapologetic bloodred, overlaid with curved black molding in elaborate geometric patterns. A huge crystal chandelier hangs from the center of each one, casting the whole room in a soft glow that only makes its grandeur more obvious.

There are no picnic-style tables here, no utilitarian trays or plastic silverware. Three long tables covered in tablecloths in shades of gold and black and cream run the length of the room. They are surrounded by tufted, high-backed chairs and set with real china and silverware.

Classical music floats through the room, dark and more than a little eerie. I don't know much about this kind of music, but I know creepy when I hear it, and this is definitely it.

So much so that I can't resist saying to Macy, "This music is very, um...interesting."

"'Danse Macabre' by Camille Saint-Saëns. Overkill, I know, but my dad has it playing in here every year for Halloween. Along with the score from *Jaws* and a few other classics. It just hasn't been changed over yet."

I think about Lia and how she said the same thing about the pillows in the library. In my old school, the Halloween spirit was pretty much exhausted by reading a scary story in English class and a costume contest on the quad at lunch. Katmere Academy takes the holiday to a whole new level.

"It's cool," I say as we find a cluster of empty seats.

"It's a lot, especially weeks after it's over. But Halloween is my dad's favorite holiday."

“Really? That’s so weird, considering my dad hated it. I thought it must have been something that happened when he was a kid, but apparently not, if your dad goes all out for the holiday.” I asked Dad once, a few years ago, why he disliked Halloween so much, and he said he would tell me when I was older.

Turns out the universe had other plans.

“Yeah, that is weird.” Macy glances around. “But isn’t this place cool? I’ve been dying for you to see it.”

“Totally cool. I want to spend hours just looking at the murals.”

“Well, you’ve got all year, so...” She gestures for me to sit. “What do you want to eat? Besides cherry Pop-Tarts, I mean.”

“I can come with you.”

“Next time. Right now you should get off your hurt ankle for a few minutes. Besides, I’m pretty sure today is going to be a little overwhelming. Let me help out where I can.”

“It’s pretty hard to say no to that,” I tell her, because she’s right. I’m already overwhelmed, and the day has barely started. I’m also touched by how hard Macy is working to make things easier for me. I smile my thanks at her.

“So don’t say no.” She pushes me playfully toward a chair. “Just tell me what you want to eat, or I’ll bring you seal steak and eggs.”

The horror must show on my face, because she bursts out laughing. “How about a pack of cherry Pop-Tarts and some yogurt with canned berries?”

“Canned berries?” I ask, doubtful.

“Yeah, Fiona, our chef, cans them herself when they’re in season. Fresh fruit is pretty hard to come by up here once late fall hits. The display at the party the other day was a special treat.”

“Oh, right.” I feel silly. Of course there aren’t any fresh berries in Alaska in November. If a pint of Ben and Jerry’s costs ten bucks, I can’t imagine what a pint of strawberries would be.

“That sounds great. Thanks.”

“No problem.” She grins at me. “Sit down and take a load off. I’ll be right back.”

I do as she directs and pick a chair that faces the wall—partly because I really do want to study the closest mural and partly because I’m sick of pretending I don’t see people staring at me. At least with my back turned to most of the room, I won’t be able to see them and they won’t be able to see my face.

The negative is that I also won’t be able to watch for Jaxon, and I was really hoping to see him this morning. Which sounds desperate, I know, but I can’t stop thinking about everything that happened between us yesterday. I kind of hoped he’d text me this morning, but he hasn’t so far.

I want to know what he meant by that journal page, want to know if it means he feels all the wild things I do. It’s impossible to imagine that he does—I knew he was out of my league the first day I met him. But that doesn’t keep me from wanting him, any more than Macy’s warnings do. Or the air of darkness that he wears like a badge of honor...or a set of shackles. I haven’t quite figured out which.

There’s a part of me that wants to sneak a look behind me, just to see if I can catch a glimpse of him. But it seems way too obvious, at least with half the cafeteria watching me. And they *are* watching—I can feel their eyes even with my back turned. I know Macy says it’s no big deal, that it’s just new-girl stuff, but it feels like more than that.

I don’t have time to dwell on it, though, because Macy’s got a fully loaded tray in her hands and is heading straight for me.

“That looks like more than Pop-Tarts and yogurt,” I tease as I help her set it down so she won’t spill anything.

“I did fine on the food, but when I got to drinks, I didn’t know if you wanted coffee or tea or juice or water or milk, so I

brought one of each.”

“Oh, wow. Um, the juice is great.”

“Thank God.” She holds out a glass of red liquid. “I was afraid you were going to say you wanted the coffee, and then I was going to *die*. Especially since Cam drinks tea, so I can’t steal his when he gets here.”

She flops dramatically into the chair across from me.

“I promise, the coffee’s all yours,” I tell her with a laugh. “And you picked the right juice—cranberry is my favorite.”

“Good.” She takes a long sip of the hot drink just to prove a point. “I thought all you California girls were Starbucks addicts.”

“I guess Cam and I have something in common. It was always more about tea at my house. My mom was an amazing herbalist. She made her own tea blends, and they were fantastic.” It’s been a month, but I can still almost taste her lemon-thyme-verbena tea. I have a few bags of it in my carry-on, but I don’t want to drink it. And truth be told, I’m afraid to even smell it in case I start crying and never stop.

“I can only imagine.”

There’s something in the way Macy says it that gets my attention, that has me trying to figure out what she means. I wait for her to say more, but then her eyes go wide, and she starts choking on a sip of coffee.

Before I can turn around to see what’s got her so discombobulated, someone asks, “Is this seat taken?”

And then I don’t have to turn around at all. Because I’d know that voice anywhere.

Jaxon Vega just asked to sit next to me. In front of everyone. It really is a brave new world.

Ten-Degree Weather Gives a Whole New Meaning to the Cool Kids' Table

“U m, yeah. Sure. Of course.” As I turn to look at him, the words pour out of my mouth without any rhyme or reason, making me sound—and feel—like a jerk.

Jaxon inclines his head, lifts a brow. “So it *is* taken, then?”

Forget sounding like a jerk. I *am* a jerk. “No! I mean, yes. I mean...” I stop, take a deep breath, and then blow it out slowly. “The seat isn’t taken. You can sit down if you’d like.”

“I *would* like.” He grabs the chair and turns it around so that when he drops down into it, he’s facing the back of the chair, one elbow draped negligently over the top.

It’s a completely ridiculous way to sit, especially on a chair this elegant...but it’s also superhot. And it’s pretty much been my kryptonite since Moises de la Cruz did it at a pool party when we were in seventh grade.

What can I say? I’m weak.

Guess I’m not the only weak one, though, because Macy makes another choked sound as she stares behind me—this one worse than the last. I tear my eyes away from Jaxon long enough to make sure that sip of coffee isn’t *actually* killing her. Thankfully, it’s not, but the fact that the other members of the

Order are currently settling themselves down at the table with us just might.

“How’s your ankle?” Jaxon asks, his dark gaze sliding over me in what I know is concern but what feels a little like a caress.

“Better. Thanks for...yesterday.”

“Which part?” The crooked grin is back, and this time when he looks me over, it feels a *lot* like a caress.

But just because I’m flustered doesn’t mean I’m a pushover. “The waffles. Obviously.”

One of the members of the Order snorts at my answer, then darts a quick look at Jaxon as he tries to smother the sound. Jaxon just kind of rolls his eyes, though, and gives a little nod in his direction. Which makes the guy laugh again and has the added effect of relaxing all the other guys as well.

“Obviously.” He shakes his head, looks away. But his smile doesn’t fade. “So you’re planning on going to class today.”

It’s not a question, but I answer anyway. “Yeah. It’s time.”

He nods like he knows what I’m talking about. “What’s your first period?”

“I don’t remember.” I pull the blue schedule Uncle Finn gave me from my jacket pocket. “Looks like Brit Lit with Maclean.”

“I’m in that class,” says one of the other members of the Order. He’s black, with friendly eyes and the hottest set of locks I’ve ever seen. “You’ll like her. She’s cool. I’m Mekhi, by the way, and I’m happy to walk you to class if you want, show you where it is.”

Macy makes yet another choking sound—I’m beginning to think her death really is imminent—at the same time that Jaxon replies, “Yeah, that’s going to happen.”

The other guys laugh, but I don’t get the joke. So I just kind of smile and say, “Thanks, Mekhi. I’d appreciate it, if you wouldn’t mind.”

That only makes them laugh harder.

I give Jaxon a WTF look, but he's just kind of shaking his head at them. Then he leans in and says, "I'll walk you to class, Grace."

He's so close that his breath tickles my ear, sending shivers down my spine that have nothing to do with Alaska and everything to do with the fact that I want this guy. That, despite all the warnings and bad behavior, I really do think I'm falling for Jaxon Vega.

"That would—" My voice breaks, and I have to clear my throat a couple of times before I can try again. "That would be nice, too."

"It *would* be nice." There's amusement in his voice, but when our eyes meet, there's no trace of laughter in his. There's also no trace of the coldness that's as much a part of him as the dark hair and long, lean body. Instead, there's a heat—an intensity—that has my hands shaking and my knees going weak.

"Should we head over now?" The question is ripped from my dry throat.

He looks pointedly at my tray. "You should eat now."

"You should eat, too." I reach for the silver package on my tray, hold it out to him.

He looks from me to the breakfast pastries and back again. "Pop-Tarts aren't what I'm hungry for."

This time, Macy's not the one making the choking sound. I look up, tracing it to its origin—the only member of the Order who looks like he might be Native Alaskan, a guy with bronze skin and long, dark hair tied into a neat ponytail at the nape of his neck.

"Something funny, Rafael?" Jaxon asks, eyes narrowed and tone silky smooth.

"Absolutely not," he answers but glances at me even as he says it, eyes brimming with mischief and delight. "I think I'm

going to like you, Grace.”

“And here the day was going so well.”

He grins. “Yeah, definitely going to like you.”

“Don’t feel too flattered, Grace. Rafael’s not exactly the most discerning guy around,” says one of the others, a boy with twinkling blue eyes and gold hoop earrings.

“Like you are, Liam?” Rafael shoots back. “The last girl you dated was a barracuda.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s an insult to barracudas everywhere,” chimes in another one of Jaxon’s friends, his Spanish accent sexily rolling his *Rs*.

“Luca knows what I’m talking about,” Rafael says.

“Because Luca’s dating history is so impressive?” Jaxon draws, joining the conversation for the first time.

The quip is so unexpected—so what I’m used to from his texts but not in person—that I can’t help staring at him. Then again, everything about this morning has been unexpected—especially the dynamic among the members of the Order. Every time I’ve seen them, they’ve appeared so tough and unapproachable. So unfeeling.

But sitting here with one another—and no one but Macy and me to witness it, since Cam and his group took one look at who was sitting with us and headed in the other direction—they’re just like any other group of friends. Except funnier. And way, way hotter. Knowing he’s got friends like this—and that he can *be* a friend like this—makes me like Jaxon even more.

Jaxon catches me staring and raises a questioning brow in my direction.

I just shrug at him like it’s no big deal and reach for my glass. Then nearly choke at the look in his eyes as he watches me. Because there’s a craving there, a dark and devastating desperation that has my breath stuttering in my chest and heat

blooming deep inside me.

He holds my gaze for one second, two. Then he slowly blinks, and when he opens his eyes again, the emptiness is back.

And still, I watch him. Still, I can't look away. Because there's something just as beautiful—and just as devastating—in their emptiness as there is in their heat. Eventually, though, I force myself to look down. Mostly because if I don't, I'm afraid I'll do something foolish like throw myself at Jaxon in front of the entire school.

Turning away from him, I forcibly yank my attention back to the conversation at hand, just in time to hear Luca say, “Hey, now. How was I supposed to know Angie was a soul-sucking demon?”

“Ummm, because we told you so?” Mekhi answers.

“Yeah, but I thought you were biased. You didn't like her from the start.”

“Because she was a soul-sucking demon,” Liam repeats. “What part of that are you not getting?”

“What can I say?” Luca gives a careless shrug. “The heart wants what the heart wants.”

“Until what the heart wants tries to kill you,” Rafael teases.

“Sometimes even then.” The words are quiet, spoken from the haunted-looking guy sitting to Macy's right.

“Seriously, Byron?” Mekhi grouses. “Why you always got to shut the conversation down?”

“I was just making an observation.”

“Yeah, a depressing observation. You need to lighten up, man.”

Byron just stares at him, lips twisted in a tiny little smile that makes him look like a modern-day embodiment of his poet namesake.

Mad, bad, and dangerous to know.

The famous quote from Lady Caroline Lamb goes through

my mind. But I'm not focused on Byron's wavy black hair and dimples when I think about her words. No, in my head, they're all about Jaxon, with his scarred face and cold eyes and smile that borders on cruel at least half the time.

Definitely bad. Definitely dangerous. As for mad...I don't know yet, but something tells me I'm going to find out.

When I think of him like that, I wonder what the hell I'm doing even contemplating feeling the way I do. After all, in San Diego, dark and dangerous wasn't exactly my type. Then again, maybe that's because I never ran into the genuine article back home. Here in Alaska... Well, all I'm saying is, there's a reason half the girls in the school are swooning over Jaxon.

Besides, there's more to him than meets the eye. No matter how angry he is, he's never been anything but gentle with me. Even that first day, when he was so obnoxious, he still never did anything that made me uncomfortable. And he's certainly never hurt me. To everyone else, he might be as dangerous as Macy warns. But to me, he seems more misunderstood than malicious, more broken than bad.

Besides, Byron called it when he implied the heart wants what the heart wants, even when it's bad. And no matter how many warnings I get about Jaxon, I'm pretty sure he's what my heart wants.

Suddenly, a weird kind of chiming sound cuts through Dvořák's "The Noonday Witch" (if I'm not mistaken) that's currently playing over the cafeteria's loudspeakers. "What is that?" I ask, looking around to see if we're suddenly being invaded by a bunch of triangle-playing guerrillas.

"The bell," Macy says. They're the first two words she's managed to choke out since the Order took up residence next to us, and all seven of us turn to her in surprise. Which just makes her flash a small little smile before shoving half a Pop-

Tart in her mouth.

“You still didn’t eat,” Jaxon says. And then he picks a Pop-Tart and hands it to me.

“Seriously?” I take it, because I know he’s just going to stand there holding it until I do. But I’m still going to call him on it. Because I’m smart enough to know that if I let him get away with the small things, he’ll try his best to steamroll me with everything else, too. “I’m pretty sure I can figure out for myself if I’m hungry or not.”

He shrugs. “A girl’s got to eat.”

“A *girl* can decide that for herself. Especially since the guy sitting next to her didn’t eat anything, either.”

Mekhi lets out a little whoop. “That’s right, Grace. Make sure he doesn’t walk all over you.”

Jaxon gives him a look that sends a chill right through me, but Mekhi just rolls his eyes, although I notice that he *does* shut his mouth for pretty much the first time since he sat down. Not that I blame him. If Jaxon looked at me like that, I think I might run for the hills.

“What classroom are you going to?” Jaxon asks as we maneuver our way through the suddenly bustling cafeteria. It’s easier than it should be, considering the mad stampede toward the doors that is currently going on. But as long as Jaxon is in the lead, the sea of students does more than just part. It pretty much leaps out of the way.

I fumble for my schedule again, but before I can so much as pull it out, Mekhi answers, “A246,” right before he disappears into the crowd.

“Apparently, A246,” I repeat, tongue firmly in cheek.

“Apparently.” He moves slightly ahead of me to push open the door. As he holds it for me, not one person darts through. Instead, they all wait patiently as I walk through, and I have

the fleeting thought that this is more than just popularity, more than just fear.

This must be what royalty feels like.

It seems absurd to even think something so bizarre, but I make it through the door and down the hall without another body—besides Jaxon’s—coming within five feet of me. And I don’t care whether I’m in an elite boarding school in Alaska or a crowded public high school in San Diego, that is *not* normal.

I also realize that the same thing happened yesterday before the snowball fight. No matter how crowded the hall got or how much jostling went on, no one so much as touched Jaxon—or Macy and me, as long as he was standing with us. “So what do you do to deserve all this?” I ask as we move toward the staircase.

“Deserve all what?”

I roll my eyes at him, figuring he’s messing with me. But the blank look he gives me says otherwise. “Come on, Jaxon. How do you not see what’s going on here?”

He glances around, clearly mystified. “What’s going on?”

Because I still can’t decide if he’s playing with me or if he really is this obtuse, I just shake my head and say, “Never mind.” Then plow ahead and pretend that I don’t notice everyone staring at me even as they scramble to get out of my way.

So yeah, that whole blending-in plan I hatched in San Diego? Officially dead on arrival.

“To Be or Not to Be”
Is a Question,
Not a Pickup Line

Jaxon walks me right up to my classroom door—which we get to in what I’m guessing is record time, considering there’s no one else in the room, not even the teacher.

“Are you sure this is the right place?” I ask as we step inside.

“Yes.”

“How do you know?” I glance at the clock. Class should start in less than three minutes, and still nobody’s here. “Maybe we should check if it got—”

“They’re waiting for me to either sit down or leave, Grace. Once one of those things happens, they’ll come in.”

“Sit down or—” I goggle at him. “So you *were* just messing with me in the hallway? You *do* notice how people treat you?”

“I’m not blind. And even if I was, it would still be hard to miss.”

“It’s madness!”

He nods. “It is.”

“That’s all you’ve got to say about it? If you know how bizarre it is, why don’t you do something to stop it?”

“Like what?” He gives me that obnoxious smirk from the first day, the one that made me want to punch him. Or kiss him.

Just the thought has my stomach spinning and has me taking a cautious step back.

He doesn't like the added distance, at least not if his narrowed eyes can be believed. And the way he takes two steps toward me before continuing. "Stand up at the pep rally and reassure everyone that I'm not going to eat them if they get too close? Somehow I don't think they'll believe me."

"Personally, I think they're more worried about being thrown in high school jail than getting eaten—"

The smirk is back. "You might be surprised."

"Well, then, you *should* reassure them. Be friendly. You know, show them that you're harmless."

I feel ridiculous even before that left eyebrow of his goes up. "Is that what you think? That I'm *harmless*?"

Jaxon doesn't sound insulted so much as astonished, and really, I can't blame him. Because I've never met anyone *less* harmless in my life. Just looking at him feels perilous. Standing next to him feels like walking a hundred-foot-high tightrope without a net. And wanting him the way I do...wanting him feels like opening a vein just to watch myself bleed.

"I think you're just as dangerous as everyone gives you credit for. I also think—"

"Yo, Jaxon, at some point, class does need to start," Mekhi interrupts as he saunters into the room—apparently the only one in this class who isn't afraid of Jaxon. "You going to take off, or are you going to keep everyone standing around watching you try to woo this girl?"

Jaxon whips his head around to glare at Mekhi, who raises his arms defensively and takes a big step back. And that's before Jaxon's voice drops a full octave as he growls, "I'll leave when I'm ready."

"I think you should probably go now," I tell him, even though

I'm as reluctant to see him go as he apparently is to leave. "The teacher needs to start class. Besides, aren't you the one who told me to keep my head down and not draw attention to myself?"

"That was the old plan."

"The old plan?" I stare at him, bemused. "When did we get a new plan?"

He smiles at me. "Two nights ago. I told you it wasn't going to be easy."

"Wait a minute." My stomach drops. "Are you telling me the cafeteria, the walk to class... This was all because of *Flint*?" Just the thought makes me feel awful.

"Flint who?" he deadpans.

"Jaxon."

"It was all because of you," he tells me.

I'm not sure I believe him, but before I can probe any more, he reaches out and takes hold of one of my curls in that way he does. He rubs it between his fingers for a couple of seconds as he watches me with those unfathomable eyes of his. "I love the way your hair smells." Then he stretches out the curl before letting it go so it can boing back into place.

"You need to go," I tell him again, though the words are a lot more breathless this time around.

He doesn't look happy, but I stare him down.

It takes a few seconds, but eventually Jaxon nods. He steps back, a grudging look on his face, and it's only as he moves away that I realize my heart is beating like a heavy-metal drummer.

"Text me a pic of your schedule," he says as he moves toward the door.

"Why?"

"So I know where to meet you later." His face melts into a grin, and the butterflies I always feel when he's around take flight in my stomach.

“I have AP Physics right now, so I’m out in the physics lab and won’t make it back before you have to go to your second period. But I’ll catch up with you later. If I can’t, I’ll have one of the others walk you to class.”

Yeah, because that will help me blend in. “You don’t have to do that.”

“It’s not a problem, Grace.”

I sigh. “What I mean is I don’t want you to do that. I just want to get to class like everyone else. On my own.”

“I get that. I do,” he continues when I give him a disbelieving look. “But I meant it when I said you aren’t safe here. At least let me watch out for you for a few days, until you learn the ropes.”

“Jaxon—”

“Please, Grace.”

It’s the please that gets me, considering I’m pretty positive Jaxon isn’t the kind of guy to ask for something when he can order it. And though I think he’s overreacting, he seems really worried, and if this will set his mind at ease, I guess I can handle it for a few days.

A very few days.

“Fine.” I tell him, giving in as gracefully as I can. “But only until the end of the week, okay? After that, I’m on my own.”

“How about, we renegotiate at the end of the week and see—”

“Jaxon!”

“Okay, okay!” He puts his hands up. “Whatever you say, Grace.”

“Yeah, right. That’s a bunch of—” I break off because he’s gone again. Because of course he is. Because that’s the story of our lives. He disappears, and I get disappeared on.

One of these days, I’m *going* to turn the tables.

He’s right, though. As soon as he leaves, the classroom floods with people. I try to stand to the side, waiting to see where there

might be an empty seat, but Mekhi nods me over to the desk next to him in the second row.

I go, even though I don't know if a person normally sits there, because it's nice to have someone in this class to talk to. Especially since he's grinning at me while everyone else is doing the same old stare-and-glare.

The teacher—Ms. Maclean—bustles in after everyone has taken their seats. She's dressed in a flowing purple caftan, her wild red hair piled atop her head in a haphazard bun that looks like it's going to fall down at any second. She's not young, but she's not old, either—maybe forty or so—and she's got a huge smile on her face as she tells everyone to open their copies of *Hamlet* to Act II.

Half the class has books and the other half has laptops, so I pull out my phone and start looking for a public-domain copy, since I left my book in California. But I've barely typed "Hamlet" in the search bar before Ms. Maclean drops a dog-eared copy on my desk.

"Hello, Grace," she murmurs in a low voice. "You can borrow one of mine until you can find one of your own online. And since you look like the shy type—despite your association with Katmere's most notorious student—I won't make you stand up and introduce yourself to the class. But know that you're welcome here, and if you need anything, feel free to stop by my office hours. They're posted by the door."

"Thanks." I duck my head as my cheeks start to get warm. "I appreciate it."

"No worries." She gives my shoulder a comforting squeeze as she heads back to the front of the room. "We're excited to have you here."

Mekhi leans over as I pick up the book and says, "Act two, scene two."

Thanks, I mouth back just as Ms. Maclean claps her hands.

Then, in true drama queen–style, she throws her arms wide and says in a booming but perfect iambic pentameter:

“Something have you heard

Of Hamlet’s transformation; so call it,

Sith nor the exterior nor the inward man

Resembles that it was.”

We spend the rest of the class discussing Hamlet’s shift from perfect prince to total downer. With Ms. Maclean doing her drama thing in the front of the room and Mekhi making sly comments in my ear every couple of minutes, it’s a lot more fun than it sounds. Mekhi may look intimidating, but he’s way more chill than Jaxon—and also really funny. It’s easy to be around him, and I end up enjoying class a lot more than I expected to, especially considering I’ve already read the play once this year.

In fact, I enjoy it so much that I’m a little disappointed when the bell rings, at least until I remember that I’ve got art next. Art’s been my favorite class pretty much since elementary school, and I’m excited to see what it’s like here. But it means heading out to the art studio, and that means a detour to my room, where I can put on at least a couple more layers to protect myself from the cold.

It’s only a ten-minute walk to the studio, so I don’t need to put on everything I did the last two times I went outside. But I do need a heavy sweatshirt and a long coat—plus gloves and a hat—if I don’t have any plans to get frostbite. Which I definitely don’t.

I just hope I have enough time to make it to my room and out to the art studio before the next bell rings. Just in case, I speed up a little, hoping to make it to the main staircase before the masses.

“Hey! What’s your rush, New Girl?”

I glance over at Flint with a grin as he comes up on my left

side. "I have a name, you know."

"Oh, right." He pretends to think. "What is it again?"

"Bite me."

"That's an interesting first name...and a phrase you might want to be careful saying around here."

"And why is that exactly?" I lift a brow at him as we weave our way through the halls. Unlike earlier with Jaxon, the whole *parting of the halls* thing is currently nowhere in effect. In fact, traversing the school with Flint is an awful lot like playing this old video game my dad used to like, where you have to race to get the frog across the street before one of the eight million cars going by splats it on the pavement.

In other words, it's a normal high school hallway. I can feel myself relaxing a little more with each near-collision.

"You're actually going to pretend you don't know?"

"Know what?"

Flint studies me, then shakes his head when I look back at him, brows raised in a definite WTF. "My mistake. Never mind."

There's something about the way he says it that has an uneasy feeling sliding through me. It's the same feeling I got when I saw Jaxon and Lia outside without a jacket yesterday.

The same feeling I got when Flint fell out of that tree and walked away with only a few bruises.

The same feeling I got when Lia was chanting in tongues in the library, even though she had no idea what I was talking about when I mentioned several of the Alaskan languages.

"I'm not dense, you know. I am aware that something isn't quite right here, even if I don't know what it is yet."

It's the first time I've acknowledged my suspicions even to myself, and it feels good to give voice to it all, instead of letting the thoughts fester below the surface.

"Are you?" Suddenly Flint is right up in my face, his whole

body only inches away from mine. “Are you really?”

I don’t back down, despite the sudden desperation in his voice. “I am. Now, do you want to tell me what it is?”

It takes a minute, but when he next speaks, the worry is gone. And so is everything else except the teasing drawl that’s as much a part of him as his amber eyes and muscles. It’s like the warning never happened, even before he says, “Where’s the fun in that?”

“You’ve got an odd definition of fun.”

“You have no idea.” He wiggles his brows. “So what are you up to anyway?”

I stare at him. “Do you ever finish any conversation without starting another?”

“Never. It’s part of my charm.”

“Yeah, just keep telling yourself that.”

“I will.” He walks several more feet with me, happily bopping along to a song that’s only in his head. “Where are you going? The classrooms are back that way.”

“I’ve got to go to my room and grab some warmer clothes. I have art next, and I’ll freeze if I go outside like this.”

“Wait.” He stops dead. “No one told you about the tunnels?”

“What tunnels?” I eye him suspiciously. “Are you messing with me again?”

“I’m not, I swear. There’s a whole network of tunnels that run under the school and lead to the different outbuildings.”

“Seriously? This is Alaska—how did they dig tunnels in the frozen ground?”

“I don’t know. How do they drill in the frozen ground? Besides, summer is a thing.” He gives me the best Boy Scout look in his repertoire. “I promise. The tunnels are real. I just can’t believe the omnipotent Jaxon Vega forgot to mention them to you.”

“Are you kidding me? You’re going to start in on Jaxon now?”

“Of course not. I’m just saying, I’m the one telling you about the tunnels and keeping you from freezing off all the important parts of your anatomy. He could have mentioned them to you before sending you out into the cruel, cruel winter.”

“It’s fall.” I roll my eyes. “And are we going to do this every time we talk about Jaxon?”

He holds his hands up in mock innocence. “As far as I’m concerned, we *never* have to talk about Jaxon.”

“Funny claim coming from a guy who keeps bringing him up.”

“Because I’m worried about you. I swear.” He draws an *X* over his heart. “Jaxon’s a complicated guy, Grace. You should stay away from him.”

“I find it interesting that he says the exact same thing about you.”

“Yeah, well, nothing says you have to listen to him.” He makes a disgusted face.

“Nothing says I have to listen to you, either.” I give him a shit-eating grin. “You see my conundrum, right?”

“Ooh. The new girl’s got some claws after all. I like it.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re a total weirdo. You know that, right?”

“Know it? I own it, baby.”

I can’t help but laugh as he makes a ridiculous face at me, crossing his eyes and sticking out his tongue. “So are you going to show me these tunnels sometime this year, or am I going to have to do my best impression of the abominable snowwoman?”

“Definitely the tunnels. Turns out I’m headed that way myself. Come on.”

He reaches for my hand and makes an abrupt left turn, tugging me down a narrow corridor that I don’t think I would have even noticed if he hadn’t dragged me into it.

It’s long and winding and slopes down so gradually that it takes me a minute to notice we’re descending. Flint keeps a

firm grip on my hand as we pass a couple of students coming the other way.

The hallway is so narrow that all four of us have to press our backs up against the wall to keep from crashing into one another as we pass.

“How much farther is it?” I ask as we get back to walking normally. Or at least as normally as we can walk as the ceiling starts to get lower as well. If this keeps up, we’ll be duck-walking through this thing like they had to do in the pyramids.

“Just another minute to the tunnel entrance and then a five-minute walk to the art studio.”

“Okay, cool.” I pull out my phone to check how we are on time—seven minutes—and see that Jaxon has texted me twice. The first one is just a string of question marks that I assume is a reminder about my schedule. And the second is the start of a joke:

Jaxon: What did the pirate say when he turned 80?

Oh my God. I’ve totally created a monster. And I love it.

I text him back a laughing emoji along with a string of question marks of my own. I also text a copy of my schedule—not because he demanded one earlier but because I want to see if he’ll follow through and find me again. Once the texts are delivered, I shove my phone back in my pocket and try to tell myself that I don’t care that much if he shows up or not. But it’s a lie, and I am very well aware of that fact.

The light is getting dimmer and dimmer the farther we go down this corridor, and if I were with anyone but Flint (or Jaxon or Macy), I’d be getting nervous. Not because I think there’s anything wrong necessarily, but because I can’t help wondering: If the walkway to the tunnels is this creepy, what are the actual tunnels going to look like?

“Okay, here we go,” Flint finally says as we come up against an

old wooden door—one that’s protected by an electronic keypad that has my eyebrows lifting to my hairline. Nothing in my life has ever looked as incongruous as that keypad in the middle of this musty, dusty corridor with a door that looks to be at least a hundred years old.

He punches in a five-digit code so fast that I don’t see any number past the first three. It takes a second, but then the light above the door flashes green at the same time as the door unlocks.

Flint glances over his shoulder at me as he reaches to pull open the door. “You ready?”

“Yeah, of course.” Another glance at my phone tells me we better hustle or I’m going to be late.

Flint holds the door for me, and I smile my thanks at him, but the second I take a step over the threshold, a little voice deep inside me starts screeching—telling me not to go any farther.

Telling me to run.

Telling me to get the hell away from these tunnels and never look back.

But Flint’s waiting for me to go. Plus, if I don’t get moving, I’ll be seriously late to art. Definitely not the first impression I wanted to make on the teacher of my favorite class.

Besides, this is Flint. The guy who jumped out of a tree and took the brunt of a very nasty fall just to save me. It’s ridiculous to think that I might have to run from *him* of all people, no matter what Jaxon says.

Which is why I shove all the new and bizarre misgivings I’m suddenly having back down where they belong. And walk straight across the threshold.

29

With Friends Like These, Everyone Needs Hard Hats

Flint follows me through, then lets the door close behind us with a solid *thump*.

The room is dim, even dimmer than the passageway here, and it takes a minute for my eyes to adjust.

“What is this place?” I demand once they do. “It doesn’t look like a tunnel.”

In fact, what it looks like is a prison. Or at least the holding area of a jail. There are several cells lining the wall in front of us, each one equipped with a bed—and, more importantly, two sets of shackles. Castle or not, Alaska or not, I am *not* okay with what I’m seeing. At all.

“I think we should go back,” I tell him, pulling at the door handle, to no avail. “How do I get this door open?” There’s no keypad on this side, nothing I can see that will get us out of here.

“You have to open it from the other side of this room,” Flint tells me, looking amused. “Don’t worry. We’ll be through here in a second.”

“I thought we were going to the tunnels. I’ve got to get to art, Flint.”

“This *is* the way to the tunnels. Chill, Grace.”

“What tunnels? This is a dungeon!” Alarm is racing through me at this point, my brain warning me that I don’t know this guy that well. That anything could happen down here. That— I take a deep breath, try to shut down the panic tearing through me.

“Trust me.” He puts a hand on my lower back, starts guiding me forward. I don’t want to go, but at this point, it’s not exactly like I’ve got a dozen alternatives. I can pound on the door, hoping that someone hears me, or I can trust Flint to do what he says and get me to the tunnel I need. Considering he’s been nothing but kind to me since I got here, I let him propel me forward and pray I’m not making a mistake.

We walk all the way to the end of the room, past four separate cells, and I don’t say a word of complaint. But when Flint stops in front of the fifth cell and tries to get me to go in, my trust and patience come to an abrupt end.

“What are you doing?” I demand. Or screech, depending on your point of view. “I’m not going in there.”

He looks at me like I’m being completely irrational. “It’s where the entrance to the tunnels is.”

“I don’t see an entrance,” I snap at him. “All I see are bars. And shackles.”

“It’s not what it looks like, I swear. These are secret tunnels, and when they built the castle a hundred years ago, they did a really good job of disguising the entrance.”

“A little too good a job, in my opinion. I want to go back up, Flint. I’ll make up some excuse for my art teacher for being late, but I—”

“It’s okay.” For the first time, he looks concerned. “We use these tunnels all the time. I promise I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“Yeah, but—” I break off as the door at the other end of the room opens. And in walks Lia.

“Hey, hold the door!” I call to her, slipping out of Flint’s loose hold and making a mad dash back toward the only obvious exit point in this hellhole of a room.

But she obviously doesn’t hear me. The door slams shut behind her. Damn it.

“Grace!” She looks surprised to see me as she fishes a pair of earbuds out of her ears. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m taking her to the tunnels.” Flint shoots me an exasperated look as he catches up to me. “She’s got art.”

“Oh yeah? With Kaufman?” Lia looks interested.

“Yeah.”

“Cool. Me too.” She gives Flint a cool glance. “I’ll take it from here.”

“No need for that,” he answers. “I’m going that way, too.”

“You don’t have to bother.”

“No bother. Right, Grace?” He grins at me, but this time he sure seems to be showing a lot of teeth.

Then again, who can blame him? He was trying to help me, and I freaked out on him for no reason. “If you’re sure.”

“Oh, I’m sure.” He loops an arm through mine. “I would love to escort you ladies to class.”

“Lucky us.” Lia’s own smile is saccharin sweet as she takes hold of my other arm and starts to walk us back toward the end of the room. As we move—both of them holding on to me—I can’t help but feel a little like a ping-pong ball caught between them.

Lia doesn’t let go until we reach the final cell. She marches inside and grabs hold of one of the arm shackles—exactly as Flint was aiming to do when I freaked out—and then pulls, hard.

The portion of the stone wall the shackles are attached to opens wide. She glances back at us, eyebrows raised. “Ready?”

Flint looks at me, tilts his head questioningly.

I feel myself blushing yet again, this time out of shame.

“Sorry. I freaked out when I shouldn’t have.”

He shrugs. “No worries. I guess I come down here so often, I forget how creepy it looks.”

“*So* creepy,” I tell him as we move into the cell. “And when you reached for that shackle—”

He laughs. “You didn’t really think I was going to chain you up down here, did you?”

“Of course she did,” Lia tells him as we walk through the trick door and she pulls it closed behind us. “I wouldn’t trust you, either. You look like exactly the kind of pervert she should never be alone with.”

“And what kind of pervert is that exactly?” he demands, glancing between the two of us.

Suddenly, I remember what Macy said about Jaxon when she was trying to warn me off him, and I can’t resist. “You know, the kind who starves a girl so he can make a dress out of her skin.”

They both stare at me like I’ve lost my mind completely. Lia looks taken aback but amused, and Flint...Flint looks more offended than anyone *ever*. It’s totally inappropriate, but I can’t help laughing. Because, come on. Who hasn’t seen that movie—or at least heard of it?

“Excuse me?” he says after a second, more ice in those words than in the entire school grounds outside.

“From *Silence of the Lambs*? That’s what the serial killer Jodie Foster is trying to catch does to his victims. It’s why she needs Hannibal Lecter.”

“Never saw the movie.”

“Oh, well, he would kidnap girls and—”

“Yeah, I got it.” He lets go of my arm for the first time since Lia showed up. “For the record, clothes made of skin, not so much my style.”

“Obviously. That’s why I made the joke.” When he doesn’t

respond, I bump my shoulder against his. “Come on, Flint. Don’t be mad. I was just playing.”

“Don’t waste your breath,” Lia tells me as we make our way farther into the tunnels. “He’s a total drag—”

“Bite me,” Flint growls.

She eyes him scornfully. “You wish.”

“I wish you’d try.” He returns her look with interest.

Wow, this devolved quickly.

“Don’t we need to get to class?” I ask, determined to interrupt whatever this is before it gets even worse. “The bell’s going to ring in a minute.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Lia tells me. “Kaufman knows it’s a pain to get to her class, so she doesn’t sweat it.”

But she does pick up the pace—after giving Flint one last look that’s a cross between a snarl and a smirk.

I follow her, leaving Flint to bring up the rear, as I figure we’ll all do better with me as a buffer between them. For the first time since last night, when Macy tried to explain that I can’t be friends with both Jaxon *and* Flint, I actually start to believe her. Lia’s obviously Team Jaxon despite whatever I witnessed between them the other day, and look how well this little excursion is going.

We’re moving fast through the tunnels now, so I don’t get to check them out the way I really want to. Still, the recessed lighting, dim as it might be, gives me at least a decent view of where I’m walking. And I have to say, terrifying entrance notwithstanding, these things are freaking *cool*.

The walls are made entirely of different-colored stones—mostly white and black, but there are colored stones, too. They gleam red and blue and green even in the faint light, and I can’t help reaching out to touch one of the bigger ones, just to see what it feels like. Cool, obviously, but also smooth, polished, like a gemstone. For a second, I wonder if that’s what they are.

But then I dismiss it as ridiculous, because what school (even a fancy, rich one like Katmere Academy) has the money to embed gemstones in the walls?

The floor is made of white brick, as are a bunch of the columns we pass as we walk. But what really gets me is the art that is down here—bone-like sculptures embedded in the walls, hanging from the ceiling, even resting on pedestals in various alcoves along the way.

It's an obvious homage to the Paris catacombs, where seven million skeletons are laid to rest—or used for macabre decorations throughout. And I can't help wondering if the school's art classes added the “bone” sculptures to the tunnels here. I also want to know what art supplies the bones are really made of.

But trying to figure that out has to wait, too, if I have any hope of making it to art class even close to on time.

As we follow the tunnel, we get to a kind of rotunda-type room that pretty much has my eyes bugging out of my head. It's obviously a main hub for the tunnels, because eleven other tunnels feed into it as well. But that's not what has my eyes going wide, even though I have no idea which of the other tunnels we should take.

No, what has my mouth falling open and my eyes pretty much bugging out of my head is the giant chandelier hanging in the center of the room, unlit candles at the end of each arm. But it's not the size of the chandelier or the fact that there are actual candles in it that catches my attention (although, fire code, anyone?). It's the fact that the chandelier, like so many of the other decorations down here, looks to be made entirely of human bones.

I know it's just art, and the bones are made of plastic or whatever, but they sure look realistic hanging off the chandelier—so much so that a chill creeps down my spine. This is more than an homage to the catacombs. It's like someone actually tried to

re-create them.

“Why are you stopping?” Flint asks, following my gaze.

“This is bizarre. You know that, right?”

He grins. “A little bit. But it’s also cool, isn’t it?”

“Totally cool.” I step farther into the room to get a better look. “I wonder how long it took. I mean, it had to be a class art project, right? Not just one student.”

“Art project?” Flint looks confused.

“We don’t know,” Lia interjects. “It was done years before we got here—years before your uncle or any of the other current teachers got here, too. But yeah, it had to be a class project. No way one artist could do all this in a semester or even a year.”

“It’s amazing. I mean, so elaborate and lifelike. Or...you know what I mean.”

She nods. “Yeah.”

There are more bones above each of the tunnels, as well as plaques bearing inscriptions in a language I don’t recognize. One of the Alaskan languages, I’m sure, but I want to know which one. So I take out my phone and snap a pic of the closest plaque, figuring I’ll google it along with the cottage names.

“We need to go,” Flint says as I start to take a second pic. “Class is starting.”

“Oh, right. Sorry.” I glance around as I shove my phone back in my blazer pocket. “Which tunnel are we taking?”

“The third one to the left,” Lia says.

We head that way, but just as we’re about to reach it, a low-grade tremor rips through the room. At first, I think I’m imagining it, but as the bones in the chandelier start to clink together in the eeriest sound imaginable, I realize there’s nothing imaginary about it.

We’re standing in the middle of a musty, crumbling old tunnel just as the earth begins to shake for real this time.

You Make
the Earth Shake
Under My Feet...
and Everywhere Else, Too

Lia's eyes go wide as the chandelier sways above us. "We need to get out of this room."

"We need to get out of these tunnels!" I answer. "How sturdy do you think they are?"

"They won't collapse," she assures me, but she starts moving toward the tunnel that's supposed to lead to the art studio pretty damn quickly.

Not that I blame her—Flint and I are moving fast, too.

It's not a big earthquake, at least not the kind that Alaska is known for. But it's not like the small tremors that I've felt since coming here, either. Based on what I've experienced back home, this one is an easy seven on the Richter scale.

Lia and Flint must realize that at the same time I do, because once we hit the new tunnel, our fast walk becomes a run.

"How far to the exit?" I demand. My phone is vibrating in my pocket, a series of texts coming in fast and furious. I ignore them as the ground continues to move.

"Maybe another couple hundred yards," Flint tells me.

"Are we going to make it?"

"Absolutely. We—" He breaks off as a loud rumbling sound

comes from the ground, followed closely by a violent shift that turns the quake from rolling to shaking.

My legs turn to rubber, and I start to stumble. Flint grabs me above the elbow to steady me, then uses his grip to propel me through the tunnel so fast that I'm not sure my feet are even touching the ground anymore. Unlike on the stairs a few days ago, this time I'm not complaining.

Lia's in front of us, running even more quickly, though I don't know how that's possible, considering just how fast Flint has us moving.

Finally, the ground starts to slant upward, and relief sweeps through me. We're almost there, almost out of this place, and so far the tunnels have held. Twenty more seconds and a door looms ahead of us. Unlike the one we originally came through, this one is covered in drawings of dragons and wolves and witches and what I'm pretty sure is a vampire on a snowboard.

It's all done graffiti-style, using every color imaginable. And it is totally badass. Another day—when the earth isn't literally moving under my feet—I'll stop to admire the artwork. For now, I wait for Lia to punch in the code—59678 (I watch carefully this time)—and then the three of us burst through the door and into what is obviously a very large art supply closet.

The earthquake stops just as the door closes behind us. I exhale in relief as Flint drops my arm, then bend over and try to catch my breath. He might have been doing most of the work to get us here, but I was moving my legs as fast as I could.

Several seconds pass before I can breathe without feeling like my lungs are going to explode. When I can, I stand back up—and notice a few things all at the same time. One, this closet is really well stocked. Two, the door into the art classroom is wide open. And three, Jaxon is standing in the doorway, face wiped completely blank of expression.

My stomach drops at my first glimpse of his clenched fists and the wild fury burning in the depths of his eyes—not because I’m afraid but because it’s obvious that he was.

For long seconds, no one says or does anything, except for Lia, who glances between Jaxon and me with a look that seems just a little bit sly. Then she tells him, “Don’t worry, Jaxon darling; *I’m* fine.” She pats him on his unscarred cheek as she walks right by him into the art classroom and closes the door behind her.

He doesn’t even glance her way. His eyes, flat and black, are pinned to Flint. Who rolls his own eyes as he says, “They’re both fine. You’re welcome.”

For long seconds, Jaxon doesn’t respond. He doesn’t even make a sound. But it turns out I only *thought* Jaxon was pissed before. Because after Flint’s comment, he looks like he’s one very small step away from an aneurysm. Or mass murder.

“Get out of here,” he growls.

“I wasn’t planning on sticking around.” Flint doesn’t move, though. Instead, he stays in front of me, staring Jaxon down.

And that’s it. That’s just it. “Move,” I order, and when Flint doesn’t move fast enough, I shove past him.

For a second, it looks like he’s going to stop me, but a low snarl from Jaxon has him stepping back. Which only pisses me off more. I get that he was afraid for me, but that doesn’t give him the right to act like a psychopath.

“Are you really okay?” Jaxon demands as I step forward.

“I’m fine.” I try to shove past him, too, but unlike Flint, Jaxon doesn’t move. He just stands there, in my way, eyes dark and still filled with anger...and something I can’t quite put my finger on as he stares down at me. Whatever it is, it makes me feel all fizzy inside, like a carbonated drink that’s been shaken way too much. Or it would if I let it. Right now, I’m too busy concentrating on

the anger to get sidetracked by the rest of it.

“I tell you to stay away from Flint, so you go into the *tunnels* with him?” he demands.

It’s the way wrong thing to say to me right now, when adrenaline is still coursing through me from the quake. And the run. And the terror. But just because I was scared out of my mind a few minutes ago doesn’t mean I’m going to put up with Jaxon demanding anything from me. Any more than I’m going to put up with him telling me what to do.

“I’m not talking to you about this right now,” I answer. “I’m late for a class that I really didn’t want to be late for, and the last thing I have time for is all this bizarre posturing from the two of you.” I include Flint in my anger.

“There’s no posturing, Grace.” Jaxon reaches for me, but I yank my hand away before he can take hold of it.

“Whatever you want to call it. It’s boring and annoying and I’m over it. So get out of my way and let me go to class before I forget I’m a pacifist and punch you in the face.”

I’m not sure which word shocks him more—the “punch” or the “pacifist.” Before either of us can figure it out, though, Flint jumps in with a, “You go, Grace. Tell him to back the fuck off.”

This time, Jaxon’s snarl is terrifying as fuck. It’s also loud enough to have the class on the other side of this closet going completely silent—even the teacher. Which, terrific. Just freaking terrific.

I whirl on Flint. “You shut up, or I’ll think of something really terrible to do to you, too.” I turn back to Jaxon. “As for you, get the hell out of my way or I’m never talking to you again.”

At first, Jaxon doesn’t move. But I think that has more to do with complete and utter astonishment (if his face is anything to go by) rather than a deliberate attempt to push back at me.

In the end, though, he lifts his hands and steps out of my

way, exactly as I'd demanded.

“Thank you,” I tell him much more quietly. “And I appreciate your concern. I really do. But this is my first day of school, and I just want to go to class.”

And then, without waiting for him to answer, I sweep past him and into a classroom where everyone—even Lia and the teacher—is staring at me.

Big. Freaking. Surprise.

31

Big Girls Don't Cry (Unless They Want To)

“G^race! Look out!”

I turn toward my cousin's voice—the first girl to speak to me since I went off on Jaxon and Flint five hours ago—just in time to see a basketball flying toward my head. I swat it away, then press my lips together to keep from crying out as pain radiates up my hand.

It's ridiculous that the act of deflecting a basketball could hurt this much, but whoever threw it threw it hard. My whole arm aches from the jolt of coming into contact with it, and I didn't even know that was possible.

“What the hell?” Macy asks the gym at large as she jogs over to me. “Who threw that?”

No one answers.

“Seriously?” My cousin puts her hands on her hips and glares at a group of girls standing by the locker room door. “Did you do this?”

“Don't worry about it,” I tell her. “It doesn't matter.”

“Doesn't matter? I heard how hard that ball hit your hand. If it had gotten your head, you could have had a concussion!”

“But it didn't. And I'm fine.” It's a bit of a stretch, considering

I'm still in pain, but I've made a big enough spectacle of myself today, thank you very much. No way am I going to start whining about a few mean girls.

Or a lot of mean girls, for that matter, one of whom apparently has a future in professional basketball.

I mean, yeah, I'm not denying it's been a weird day. I haven't seen Jaxon or Flint since I went off on them this morning. But even though Jaxon hasn't shown up at any more of my classes, Byron was waiting outside my art class with an extra parka when it let out—so I wouldn't have to go through the spooky-as-hell tunnels again, thank God. Rafael sat with Macy and me at lunch plus walked us to AP Spanish, the one class we share. And Liam walked me from Spanish to PE.

None of which went unnoticed by the other students and none of which has exactly worked in my favor. I mean, I wasn't looking to make a bunch of friends here, but I also don't want to have to dodge flying basketballs every second of the day, either.

"You sure you're okay?" Macy asks, frowning at the way I'm wiggling my fingers and shaking my hand.

I stop immediately. "I'm sure. I'm fine." The last thing I want is for Macy to make a big deal out of something that could have been a lot worse.

She shakes her head but doesn't say anything else about the basketball. And if I catch her glaring at some of my classmates, I'm not going to call her out on it. I'd be pissed if someone was messing with her, too.

Still, it's past time to change the subject, so I ask, "What's all this?" gesturing to the black leotard, tights, and sequined skirt she's wearing.

"Dance team," she answers with a proud little grin. "I've got one of the solos at Friday's pep rally."

"Seriously? That's amazing!" I squeal, even though I've never

been a big dance team enthusiast. But Macy obviously loves it, and that's enough for me.

"Yeah. I'm dancing to—" She breaks off as the coach blows a whistle.

"What does that mean?" I ask.

"It means the period's over. And since this is the last one, it also means you're free." Macy grins. "I've got practice for two hours after school, but I'll find you when I'm done, and we can go to dinner together. *If* there's not another earthquake, that is."

"Right?" There have been several more tremors this afternoon—nothing big, just aftershocks, but they've definitely set most of the students, me included, on edge. "Who knew I'd experience more earthquakes in four days at the center of Alaska than I did my whole life living on the coast in California?"

"It's weird," she agrees, looking baffled. "Sure, we have a quake every once in a while, but we haven't had this many in a row in a long time. Maybe ever. You must have brought them with you."

"Sorry about that," I joke. "I'll try to tone it down."

"You do that," she answers with a grin. "See you after practice."

"See you."

I shoot her a little wave before heading back toward the locker room. No one bothers me as I change, but no one talks to me, either. And I gave up trying to talk to people somewhere around lunchtime. I can only take so many cold shoulders before I get the message.

I get dressed in record time, then grab my backpack and head out. I probably should go back to my room and get started on my homework, but I'm not used to being cooped up in one room all the time.

Back home, I was always outside—in the pool, at the beach,

running through the park. I even did my homework on the front porch swing, watching the sun set over the water.

Going from that to being stuck inside almost all the time is more than a little rough.

I think about heading to my room and changing into all those outdoor clothes so I can go for a walk. But nothing about me is particularly thrilled at the idea of putting on half my closet just to brave the subfreezing temperatures, either, so in the end, I decide on a compromise. I'll wander around the castle, getting to know it better, since there are huge portions I haven't set foot in yet, even with my classes taking me all over the place today.

For a second, Jaxon's warning from the first night flits through my head, but that was for late at night. Just because the sun outside the castle has been down for a couple of hours already doesn't mean the halls aren't safe now, while everyone is awake and going from one activity to another. Also, I'm not going to spend the rest of the school year afraid of the people I go to school with. Those guys the other night were assholes, no doubt about it, but they caught me unprepared. No way am I going to let it happen again. And no way am I going to become a prisoner in my own school.

Thoughts of Jaxon have me pulling out my phone and opening my message app. There are six text messages waiting for me from Jaxon—all sent during the earthquake. I haven't opened them yet because at first I was too mad to want to know what he had to say. Then I didn't want to be around anyone when I opened them. I tend to wear my emotions on my sleeve, and the last thing I want is for someone watching me to see how I feel about Jaxon—especially when I currently have no idea what, if anything, is going to happen between us.

The first message came in a few minutes after Brit Lit got out.

Jaxon: Hey, thought I'd catch you at art, but you aren't here.

Are you lost? ;)

A few more minutes had passed before the second message came in.

Jaxon: Need a search and rescue? o_O

The third message came in pretty fast after the second one, followed in quick succession by the next three.

Jaxon: Sorry to bug you, just want to make sure you aren't in any trouble. Quinn and Marc aren't bothering you, are they?

Jaxon: Hey, you okay?

Jaxon: Getting worried over here. Just looking for a heads-up that those jerks haven't found you again. You good?

Jaxon: Grace?

I remember the messages coming in during the earthquake and not paying any attention to them. But now that I've read them, I feel like a total jerk. Not for not answering them right away, because—earthquake!

And yeah, I definitely don't have to answer him just because he wants me to. But I do feel guilty for laying into him the way I did in the art studio when he was obviously just worried about me. And for not answering him for so long when he actually apologized in his texts—something—like please—I'm pretty sure the great Jaxon Vega almost never does.

All I was thinking about in that art closet was how embarrassed I was that he was there, arguing with Flint and making a spectacle of me. I didn't think about the fact that he was there because he was concerned about me and that the fight with Flint happened because he was so on edge.

In my old school, it would be absurd, and probably even a little freaky, to have a guy get so worried about me. But I can't really blame Jaxon for being legitimately concerned, not when he's already had to rescue me twice. And not when his last texts came in the middle of a freaking earthquake, which got people

so worked up that every teacher I had for the rest of the day took ten minutes out of class time to go over earthquake safety.

If everyone else is freaked out by the quake, it's hard to be upset at Jaxon for feeling the same way.

Because I feel bad for making him wait so long for a response, I fire off a couple of texts in quick succession.

Me: Sorry, been busy and haven't checked my phone

Me: You busy? Want to explore the castle with me?

Me: And hey, you never told me the punch line to the joke

When he doesn't answer right away, I shove my phone in my blazer pocket and wander into one of the side hallways with no real destination in mind for my exploration.

I pass a room where two people are fencing, complete with white uniforms and head masks, and pause to watch for a little while. Then I wander down to the music hall, where a curly-haired boy is playing the saxophone. I recognize the tune as "Autumn Leaves," and just the sound of it nearly brings me to my knees.

Cannonball Adderley cut an album in 1958 called *Somethin' Else*. Miles Davis and Art Blakey played on it, and it was my father's favorite—especially the song "Autumn Leaves." He used to play it over and over when he was working around the house, and he made me listen to it with him at least a hundred times, where he described every single note, explaining over and over how and why Adderley was such a genius.

The last month since my parents died is probably the longest I've gone without hearing that song in my entire life, and to run across it here, now, feels like a sign. Not to mention a punch to the gut.

Tears flood my eyes, and all I can think about is getting away. I turn and run, not caring where I'm going, knowing only that I need to escape.

I take the back stairs and climb up and up and up, until I arrive at the highest tower. Most of it is taken up by whatever room lies behind the closed door, but there's a tiny alcove right off the stairs with a huge window—the first one in the castle that I've actually seen with the curtains open—that looks out over the front of the school. It's dark out right now, but the view is still gorgeous: the snow lit up by lampposts and the midnight-blue sky filled with stars as far as the eye can see.

The room itself has built-in bookshelves that go all the way around it and a couple of comfy, overstuffed chairs to lounge in. It's obviously a reading nook—everything from the classics to modern-day Stephen King fill up the shelves—but I'm not here to read, no matter how much I usually love it.

Instead, I sink down on one of the chairs and finally, finally let the tears come.

There are a lot of them—I haven't cried, really cried, since the funeral, and now that I've started, I'm not sure I'll ever stop. Grief is a wild thing within me, a rabid animal tearing at my insides and making everything hurt.

I'm trying to be quiet—the last thing I want is to draw more attention to myself—but it's hard when it hurts this much. In self-defense, I wrap my arms around myself and start to rock, desperate to ease the pain. Even more desperate to find a way to hold myself together when everything inside me feels like it's falling apart.

It doesn't work. Nothing does, and the tears just keep coming, as do the harsh, wrenching sobs tearing from my chest.

I don't know how long I stay here, battling the pain and loneliness that comes from losing my parents in the blink of an eye and then everything familiar in my life less than a month later, but it's long enough for the sky to turn from the dark blue of civil twilight to pitch black.

Long enough for my chest to hurt.

More than long enough for the tears to run dry.

Somehow, running out of tears only makes everything hurt worse.

But sitting here isn't going to change that. Nothing is, which means I might as well get up. Macy should be done with dance practice soon, and the last thing I want is for her to come looking for me.

Having her see me like this—having *anyone* see me like this—is the threat that finally galvanizes me. Except that when I climb to my feet and turn around, it's to find that someone already has.

Jaxon.

32

It's Not a
Coincidence that
Denali and Denial
Use All the Same Letters

Jaxon's standing at the head of the stairs, face blank but eyes searching as he stares at me.

Embarrassment slams through me, makes my face hot and my breath stutter. I start to ask him how long he's been there, but it doesn't really matter. He's been there long enough.

I wait for him to say something, to ask if I'm okay again or to tell me to stop whining or to say one of the million and three things that fall somewhere in between those two reactions.

He doesn't, though.

Instead, he just stands there, watching me with those black-magic eyes of his until I lose my breath again...this time for a whole different reason.

"I-I'm sorry," I finally stumble out. "I should go."

He doesn't respond, so I move toward the stairs, but he keeps blocking them. And keeps watching me, head tilted just a little, like he's trying to figure something out while I pray for the ground to open up and swallow me.

Now would be a perfect time for another one of those earthquakes, is all I'm saying.

When he finally speaks, his voice sounds a little rusty. "Why?"

“Why should I leave? Or why was I crying?”

“Neither.”

“I...have no idea what I’m supposed to say to that.” I blow out a long breath. “Look, I’m sorry I threatened to hit you in the art studio today. You’re just...a lot sometimes.”

He lifts a brow, but other than that, his blank expression doesn’t change. “So are you.”

“Yeah.” I give a watery laugh, gesture to my still-wet cheeks. “Yeah, I can see why you might think that.”

I’m only a few steps from him, but he closes the gap, moving in until he’s only inches away from me. My mouth goes desert dry.

I wait for him to say something, but he doesn’t. I wait for him to touch me, but he doesn’t do that, either. Instead, he just stands there, so close that I can feel his breath on my cheek. So close that I’m sure he can feel my breath on his.

And still his eyes are dark, empty, blank.

More seconds that feel like minutes tick by until finally, *finally* he whispers, “What’s it like?”

“What’s what like?” I’m baffled, and a little afraid that I’m setting myself up to be the punch line of some joke.

“What’s it like to just be able to let go like that?”

“Like what? My crying jag?” Embarrassment swamps me again, and I wipe at my cheeks, trying to disappear even the remnants of my tears. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for anyone to see me. I—”

“Not just that. I mean, what’s it like to be able to show what you feel and how you feel, whenever you want, without having to worry about...” He trails off.

“What?” I ask. “Without having to worry about what?”

For long seconds, he just looks at me. Then he kind of shakes his head and says, “Never mind.” He walks past me, opens the door to the room that lays just beyond the alcove, and walks inside.

I stare after him, not sure what I'm supposed to do. It feels like our conversation is over, like he just dismissed me, but he left his door open in what looks like an invitation.

I stand there for another minute or so, undecided, before he finally sticks his head back out the door. "Coming?" he asks.

I follow him inside—of course I do. But I'm completely unprepared for what I find when I walk into the room, a room I can't help thinking of as my own private wonderland.

Books are everywhere, stacked haphazardly on nearly every available surface.

There are three guitars in the corner, along with a drum kit that has my mouth watering and my fingers itching to touch it. To play it, like I used to play mine back when I still had one.

Back when I still had a lot of things.

In the center of the room is a giant black leather couch, covered with piles of thick, soft pillows that all but beg to be napped on.

I want to touch everything, want to run my hands over the drum kit just so I can feel its soul. I have just enough self-control left not to follow my impulses, but it's hard. So hard that I can't help but tuck my hands in my blazer pockets, just to be on the safe side.

Because I've only just now realized that this is Jaxon's dorm room, and to say it's unexpected is pretty much the understatement of the century.

Jaxon seems completely uninterested in his surroundings, which seems bizarre to me even though I know it's because this is his stuff. He sees and touches and uses it every day. But there's a part of me that still wants to know how he can just ignore the pile of art books by the couch or the giant purple crystal on his desk. It's the same part of me all but screaming that, no matter what Jaxon thinks, I'm nowhere near cool

enough to be in here with him.

Since he's not talking, I turn to look at the art on the wall, big, wild paintings with bold colors and strokes that excite all kinds of ideas inside me. And hanging next to his desk—even more unbelievably—is a small pencil sketch of a woman with wild hair and sly eyes, dressed in a voluminous kimono.

I recognize it, or at least I think I do, so I walk closer, trying to get a better look. And sure enough—

“This is a Klimt!” I tell him.

“Yes,” he affirms.

“That wasn't a question.” It's under glass, so I reach out and tap the artist's signature in the bottom right corner. “This is an original Klimt, not a reproduction.”

This time he doesn't say anything, not even *yes*.

“So you're just going to stand there with your hands in your pockets?” I demand. “You're not even going to answer me?”

“You just told me you weren't asking questions.”

“I'm not. But that doesn't mean I don't want to hear the story.”

He shrugs. “There's no story.”

“You have an original Klimt hanging next to your desk. Believe me, there's a story there.” My hands are shaking as I trace the lines through the glass once again. I've never been this close to one of his pieces before.

“I liked it. It reminded me of someone. I bought it.”

“That's it? That's your story?” I stare at him incredulously.

“I told you there wasn't a story. You insisted there was.” He cocks his head to the side, watches me through narrowed eyes. “Did you want me to lie?”

“I want you to...” I shake my head, blow out another long breath. “I don't know what I want you to do.”

At that, he lets out a small laugh—the very first sign of emotion he's shown since that one frantic *are you okay* in the

art room. “I know the feeling.”

He’s halfway across the room, and there’s a part of me that wishes he were closer. That wishes we were touching right now.

Of course, there’s another part of me that’s still terrified of touching him, even more terrified of having him touch me. Being in his room is too much. Looking at him worry his lower lip in the first show of nerves I’ve ever seen from him is too much.

Being touched by him, held by him, kissed by him, would be so, so, *so* too much that I’m afraid I’ll implode at the first brush of his lips against mine. Afraid I’ll just burn up where I’m standing. No warning, no chance to stop it. Just a brush of his hand against mine and poof, I’m a goner. I swear it almost happened when he carried me back to my room the other night, and that was before he sent me waffles and walked me to class and charmed me with his text messages. Way before I saw this place.

I wonder if he’s afraid of the same thing, because instead of answering, he turns around and enters what I assume is his bedroom. At least until he realizes I’m still staring at the Klimt—and every other fabulous thing in the room—to be following him.

He kind of rolls his eyes, but then he comes back and gently herds me toward his bedroom, all without laying a finger on me.

“Come on. There’s something I want you to see.”

I follow him without question. With Flint earlier, I had moments of concern, of worry that it wasn’t safe to be alone with him. Everything inside me warns that Jaxon is a million times more dangerous than Flint, and still I have not an ounce of trepidation when it comes to being alone in his bedroom with him. When it comes to being anywhere, or doing anything, with him.

I don’t know if that makes me foolish or a good judge of character. Not that it really matters, because it is what it is.

Jaxon stops near the edge of his bed and picks up the heavy

red blanket folded across the edge of it. Then he reaches into his top dresser drawer and pulls out a pair of faux fur-lined gloves and tosses them to me. “Put those on and come on.”

“Come on where?” I ask, baffled. But I do as he asks and slide my hands into the gloves.

He opens the window, and frigid air rushes in.

“You can’t be serious. No way am I going out there. I’ll freeze.”

He looks over his shoulder at me and winks. He *winks*.

“What was that?” I demand. “Since when do you wink?”

He doesn’t answer beyond a quick twist of his lips. And then climbs out the window and drops three feet onto the parapet just below the tower.

I should ignore him, should simply turn around and walk out of this room, away from any boy who thinks I’m dumb enough to hang out on an Alaskan roof in November with nothing more than a blazer to keep me warm. That’s what I *should* do.

Of course, just because I should do it doesn’t mean I will.

Because, apparently, when I’m with this boy, I lose all common sense. And part of losing that common sense means doing exactly what I shouldn’t—in this case, following Jaxon straight out the window and onto the parapet.

Madonna's Not the Only One with a Lucky Star

The second I drop down beside him—or should I say the second he helps me down, being super careful of my still tender ankle—Jaxon wraps the blanket around me, head and all, so that only my eyes stick out. And I have to say, I'm not sure what the blanket is made of, but the moment it's wrapped around me, I stop shivering. I'm not exactly warm, but I'm definitely not going to be dying of hypothermia anytime soon, either.

"What about you?" I ask when I realize he's wearing only his hoodie. It's a heavy hoodie, the same one he was wearing when I saw him outside yesterday with Lia, but still, nowhere near enough protection for the weather. "We can share the blanket."

I break off when he laughs. "I'm fine. You don't need to worry about me."

"Of course I'm going to worry about you. The weather is frigid."

He shrugs. "I'm used to it."

"That's it. I have to ask."

Everything about him turns wary. "Ask what?"

"Are you an alien?"

Both his brows go up this time, all the way to his hairline.

“Excuse me?”

“Are. You. An. Alien? I can’t believe it’s that shocking of a question. I mean, look at you.” I wave an arm up and down under the blanket, my way of encompassing everything that is Jaxon in one fell swoop.

“I can’t look at myself.” For the first time, he sounds amused.

“You know what I mean.”

“I really don’t.” He leans down so there’s only a couple of inches separating our faces. “You’re going to have to explain it to me.”

“Like you don’t already know you’re pretty much the hottest person alive.”

He rears back like I’ve struck him, and I don’t think he even realizes that he touches his scar as he says, “Yeah, right.”

Which...come on. “You have to know that scar makes you sexy as hell, right?”

“No.” It’s a short answer. Simple. Succinct, even. And yet it reveals so much more than he’d ever want anyone to see.

“Well, it does. Sexy. As. Hell,” I repeat. “Plus, there’s the way everyone pretty much kisses your ass *all* the time.”

“Not everyone.” He gives me a pointed look.

“*Almost* everyone. And you never get cold.”

“I get cold.” He burrows a hand inside the blanket, presses his fingers to my arm. And he’s right; he is cold. But he’s also nowhere close to being frostbitten, which is what I would be if I’d stood out here this long in just a hoodie.

I give him a look and try to pretend that, despite the chill, his hand on my arm doesn’t flood every cell of my body with heat. “You know what I mean.”

“So let me get this straight. Because I: one, am the hottest person alive”—he smirks as he says it—“two, make everyone genuflect, and three, don’t get cold very often, you’ve decided

I'm an alien."

"Do you have a better explanation?"

He pauses, considers. "I do, actually."

"And it is *what* exactly?"

"I could tell you..."

"But then you'd have to kill me?" I roll my eyes. "Seriously? We've reverted to tired old *Top Gun* lines?"

"That's not what I was going to say."

"Oh yeah?" It's my turn to cock my head to the side. "So what were you going to say?"

"I was going to say, 'You can't handle the truth.'"

He totally deadpans it, but I burst out laughing anyway. Because how can I not when he's quoting *A Few Good Men* to me? "So you're an old-movie buff? Or just an old-Tom Cruise-movie buff?"

"Ugh." He makes a face. "Definitely not the second. As for old movies, I've seen a few."

"So if I mentioned starving women and making a dress out of their skin, you'd know I meant—"

"Buffalo Bill from *Silence of the Lambs*? Yeah."

I grin at him. "So maybe not an alien after all."

"*Definitely* not an alien."

Silence stretches between us for a while. It's not awkward. In fact, it's kind of nice to just be able to *be* for a little while. But eventually the cold works its way through his magic blanket. I pull it more closely around myself and ask, "Are you going to tell me what we're doing out here?"

"I told you I was going to show you my favorite place today."

"*This* is your favorite place?" I look around with new eyes, determined to figure out what he likes about it.

"I can see for miles up here, and no one ever bothers me. Plus..." He glances at his phone, then very deliberately looks up

at the sky. “You’ll figure it out in about three minutes.”

“Is it the aurora borealis?” I ask, trepidation replaced instantly by excitement. “I’ve been dying to see it.”

“Sorry. You’ve got to be up in the middle of the night to get a look at the northern lights.”

“So then what—?” I break off as what appears to be a giant fireball streaks its way across the sky. Seconds later, another one follows it.

“What’s going on?” I wonder aloud.

“A meteor shower. We don’t get many up here because they tend to take place in the summer, when we’ve got daylight most of the time and can’t see them. But when we do have one in the winter, it’s pretty spectacular.”

I gasp as another three meteors fly by, leaving long, glowing tails in their wake. “That’s an understatement. This is incredible.”

“I thought you might like it.”

“I do. I really do.” I glance at him, suddenly shy, though I don’t know why. “Thank you.”

He doesn’t answer, but then I’m not expecting him to.

We stand out on the parapet for a good half an hour, not talking, not even looking at each other much, just watching the most brilliant show I’ve ever seen light up the sky. And I love every second of it.

It’s weird, but something about being out here, looking at the vast night sky overlooking the vast, snowy mountains...it puts things in perspective. Reminds me of how tiny I really am in the grand scheme of things, of how fleeting my problems and my grief are, no matter how painful and all-encompassing they feel right now.

Maybe that’s what Jaxon intended when he brought me out here.

When the shower ends, it comes with a burst of seven or eight

comets in a row. I can't help oohing and aahing as they burn their way across the sky. When it's over, I expect to feel let down—like what happens at the end of a really good movie or fireworks show. That little pang of disappointment that something so wonderful is over forever.

But with the meteor shower, I feel...as close to peaceful as I have in a very long time.

"We should go in," Jaxon says eventually. "It's getting colder."

"I'm okay. I just want another minute or two, if that's all right."

He inclines his head in an *of course* kind of gesture.

There's so much I want to say to him, so many things he's done for me in the very short time we've known each other. But whenever I try to come up with the words, they don't sound right in my head. So eventually, I settle for "Thank you."

He laughs, but it's a sound completely devoid of humor. I don't understand why until I look in his eyes and realize they are completely blank again. I don't like it at all.

"Why do you laugh when I thank you?" I demand.

"Because you don't ever have to thank me, Grace."

"Why not? You did something really nice for me—"

"No I didn't."

"Um, yeah you did." Under the blanket, I hold my arms out in the universal gesture of look-at-all-this. "Why don't you just admit it? Take the compliment and move on."

"Because I don't deserve the compliment." The words seems to burst straight out of him without his permission, and now that they're hanging there, he looks a little sick. "I'm just doing my..."

"Your what? Your *job*?" I ask, my stomach clenching at the thought. "Did my uncle ask you to be nice to me or something?"

He laughs, but there's still no amusement in the sound. No joy. Just a soul-deep cynicism that has my eyes watering all over again but for very different reasons. "I'm the last person Foster

would ever ask to be friends with you.”

If I were more polite and less concerned about him, I’d be inclined to drop the subject entirely. But politeness has never been one of my virtues—I’ve got too much curiosity for that—so instead, I call him on his shit. “And why is that exactly?”

“It means I’m not a nice person. I don’t do *nice* things. Ever. So it’s ridiculous to compliment me on your perception of what I do.”

“Really?” I shoot him a skeptical look. “Because I hate to be the one to break it to you, but cheering up a sad girl is a *nice* thing to do. So is carrying her back to her dorm when she hurts her ankle and chasing off guys who think pranks that can kill people are funny. So is charming the cook into making an injured girl waffles. All nice things, Jaxon.”

For the first time, he looks uncomfortable, but he still won’t back down. “I didn’t do it for you.”

“Oh yeah? Then who did you do it for?”

He doesn’t have an answer. Of course he doesn’t.

“That’s what I thought.” I grin up at him, all cocky and obnoxious because, on this, I can be. “Looks to me like you’re just going to have to accept the fact that you did something sweet. You won’t burn at the stake, I promise.”

“They only burn witches.”

He sounds so serious that I can’t stop myself from laughing. “Well, I’m pretty sure we’re safe, then.”

“Don’t be too sure about that.”

I start to ask him what he means, but a violent shiver racks me at the same time—blanket or no blanket, it’s freaking cold out here—and Jaxon takes the decision into his own hands. “Come on. Time to get you inside.”

Hard to argue when my teeth are about a minute away from chattering. But when I glance up at the window we came out of,

I can't help wondering, "How exactly are we going to get back in? And by we, I mean me." Dropping three feet out of a window is one thing. Boosting myself back up is another thing entirely.

But Jaxon just shakes his head. "Don't worry. I've got you, Grace."

Before I can figure out why those words sizzle through me like a lightning bolt, he's grabbing onto the windowsill and swinging himself inside. The whole move takes about one point four seconds, and I have to admit, I'm impressed. Then again, nearly everything Jaxon does impresses me, whether he means it to or not. *He* impresses me.

More, he makes me feel not so alone at a time when I've never been lonelier.

He's back in moments, poking his head and upper body out of the window. "Give me your hands."

I lift my arms up without a second thought, and he grabs onto my forearms, right below the elbow, and pulls. Seconds later, I'm back through the window and standing an inch, maybe two, from Jaxon.

And for once, his eyes aren't dead. They're on fire.

And they're focused directly. On. Me.

All's Fair in Love and Earthquakes

I stare back at him, not sure what to expect...or what to do. There's a part of me that thinks he's going to back up and a part of me that really hopes he doesn't. A part of me that wonders what it would feel like to kiss him and a part of me that thinks I should run for the hills, because Jaxon might not be an alien, but he's not like any boy I've ever met, either. And I am more than honest enough to admit that, much as I may want him, there's no way I can actually handle him.

In the end, he doesn't kiss me. But he doesn't back up, either. And neither do I. So we stand there for I don't know how long, him looking down, me looking up, the air between us loaded, heavy, electric.

I'm in it now, captivated by everything Jaxon is and everything he isn't, despite my misgivings. I wait for him to make a move, but he doesn't. He just keeps looking at me with those midnight eyes of his, emotion he rarely shows seething right below the surface. It makes me ache for him. Makes me physically hurt as I remember the question he asked earlier, the one that started all this.

I finally have the words—or in this case, the word—to answer

him. “Overwhelming,” I say just as he starts to slide the blanket from my shoulders.

He freezes, the blanket, and his hands, hovering somewhere around the middle of my back. “What are you talking about?”

“You asked me what it was like to just let go and purge my emotions the way I did. It feels overwhelming sometimes, even a little terrifying. But what you just did for me...made me feel safe in a way I haven’t in quite a while. So thank you. Seriously.”

“Grace...”

I take one step closer, until my breasts are just brushing against his chest. I don’t know what I’m doing here. I’ve never made a move on a guy in my life, and Jaxon isn’t just any guy. I’m flying blind, but that doesn’t matter now. Nothing does except touching him somehow.

I want him to feel the strength of my arms around him, the softness of my body against his. And I want to feel the warm power of him against my own.

Except he’s not warm at all, that hoodie of his obviously no defense against the weather, despite what he said.

“Jaxon, you’re freezing!” I pull the blanket from his hands and throw it around his shoulders before wrapping it all the way around him. Then I rub my hands up and down his blanket-covered arms, trying to chafe some warmth back into him.

“I’m fine,” he says, trying to back away.

“You’re obviously not fine. I’ve never felt anyone as cold as you are right now.”

“I’m fine,” he insists again, and this time he does take a step back. Several steps, in fact.

Everything inside me stops. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to invade your personal space...” I break off, because I don’t know what else to say. I don’t know what I’ve done that is so wrong.

“Grace...” His voice trails off, too. And in that moment, he

looks different than all the other times. He isn't confident, isn't amused, isn't even stoically silent as he was when I was yelling at him in the art studio.

No, right now he just looks...vulnerable.

There's a desire in his eyes, a craving that has nothing to do with wanting me and everything to do with needing me. Needing my comfort. Needing my touch.

I can no more deny him than I can jump off this tower and fly under my own power. So I follow his retreat, taking the steps that bring my body back into contact with the hardness of his. Then I cup his face in my hands, stroke my thumbs over his ridiculous cheekbones and my fingers over the jagged edges of his scar.

His breath catches—I hear it in his chest, feel it against me. And though my heart is beating faster than triple time, I don't back away. I can't. I'm dazzled, mesmerized, enthralled.

All I can think about is him.

All I can see is him.

All I can smell and hear and taste is him.

And nothing has ever felt so right.

"Can I ask you a question?" I move even closer to him, unable to stop myself. *Unwilling* to stop myself.

For a second, I think he's going to take a step back, but he doesn't. Instead, he opens up the blanket and wraps it around me, too, so that his arms are around my waist and we're both sheltered within it. "Of course."

"Who did that Klimt sketch remind you of when you bought it?"

"You." The answer comes fast and honest. "I just didn't know it yet."

And just like that I melt. Just like that, this boy—this dark, damaged, devastating boy—touches a part of me I wasn't even sure existed anymore. A part of me that wants to believe. Wants

to hope. Wants to love.

I want to reach for him, want to grab on—want to hold on—but I can't. I'm frozen, terrified of wanting too much. Needing too much, in a world where things can just disappear between one moment and the next.

"Grace." He says my name softly, half whisper, half prayer, as he waits patiently for me to look at him.

But I can't. Not now. Not yet. "Have you ever—" My voice breaks and I take a deep breath, blow it slowly out. Take another one, and blow that one out, too. Then try again. "Have you ever wanted something so much that you were afraid to take it?"

"Yes." He nods.

"Like it's right there, waiting for you to just reach out and grab it, but you're so terrified of what will happen when you lose it that you never make the reach?"

"Yes," he says again, his voice low and deep and comforting in a way that burrows inside me.

I tilt my head up until our eyes meet, and then I whisper, "What did you do?"

For long seconds, he doesn't say anything. He doesn't do anything. He just stares back at me with a look in his eyes as scarred and broken as the rest of him. And says, "I decided to take it anyway."

Then he leans down and presses his lips to mine.

It's not a passionate kiss, not a hard kiss, definitely not a wild kiss. It's just the brush of one mouth against another, as soft as a snowflake, as delicate as the permafrost that stretches in all directions.

But for me, at least, it's just as powerful. Maybe more.

And then—suddenly—his hands are on my upper arms, holding me in place. His fingers squeezing tightly, pulling me against him as his mouth goes crazy on mine.

Lips, tongue, teeth, it's a cacophony of sensations—a riot of pleasure, desperation, need all wrapped into one—as he takes me. As he takes and takes and takes...and gives back even more.

It's a good thing he's holding on to me because my head spins and my knees go weak at the first swipe of his tongue along mine—just like one of those heroines from a novel. I've been kissed before. But no kiss ever made me feel like this. I strain against him, try to slide my arms up around his neck, but his hands are vises on my biceps, holding me in place. Holding me still, so that all I can do is take what he gives me.

And he gives a lot, head tilting, mouth moving on mine. My head gets lighter, my knees get weaker, and I swear I feel the ground trembling beneath my feet. And still the kiss goes on.

The trembling gets worse, and it hits me a second before my knees buckle. It's not just our kiss. The earth is actually shaking again.

“Earthquake!” I manage to squeak out, wrenching my mouth from his.

Jaxon doesn't listen at first, just follows my lips with his like he wants to keep on kissing me forever. And I almost let it go, almost melt back into him—I'm a California girl, after all. If it were a bad one, things would already be falling off the walls.

But it must hit Jaxon at the same time I'm about to forget about it, because not only does he let me go, but he's halfway across the room between one breath and the next.

I watch as he clenches his fists by his sides, as he takes a long, slow, deep breath...and then another and another as the earth continues to shake.

“It's okay,” I tell him. “It's just a small quake, nowhere near as bad as the one this morning. It'll be over in a second.”

“You have to go.”

“What?” I couldn't have heard him right. He couldn't have

been kissing me like he wanted to devour me a few seconds ago and now be demanding that I leave in a voice as cold as the air outside. “It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine,” he snaps out, and it’s the only sign of emotion from him now that his face and eyes are blank again. “You. Need. To. *Go!*”

“Jaxon.” I can’t stop myself from reaching for him. “Please—”

All of a sudden, his bedroom window shatters, glass flying in all directions. It sounds like an explosion, and I let out a strangled scream as shards of glass hit me above my eyebrow and on my neck, my cheek, my shoulder.

“Go!” Jaxon shouts, and this time there’s no defying him. Not when he looks and sounds so out of control.

He advances on me then, fingers flexing and eyes burning like black coals in a face livid with rage.

I turn and run as fast as my weak knees will carry me, determined to get to the staircase, to freedom, before this strange, monstrous version of Jaxon overtakes me.

I don’t make it.